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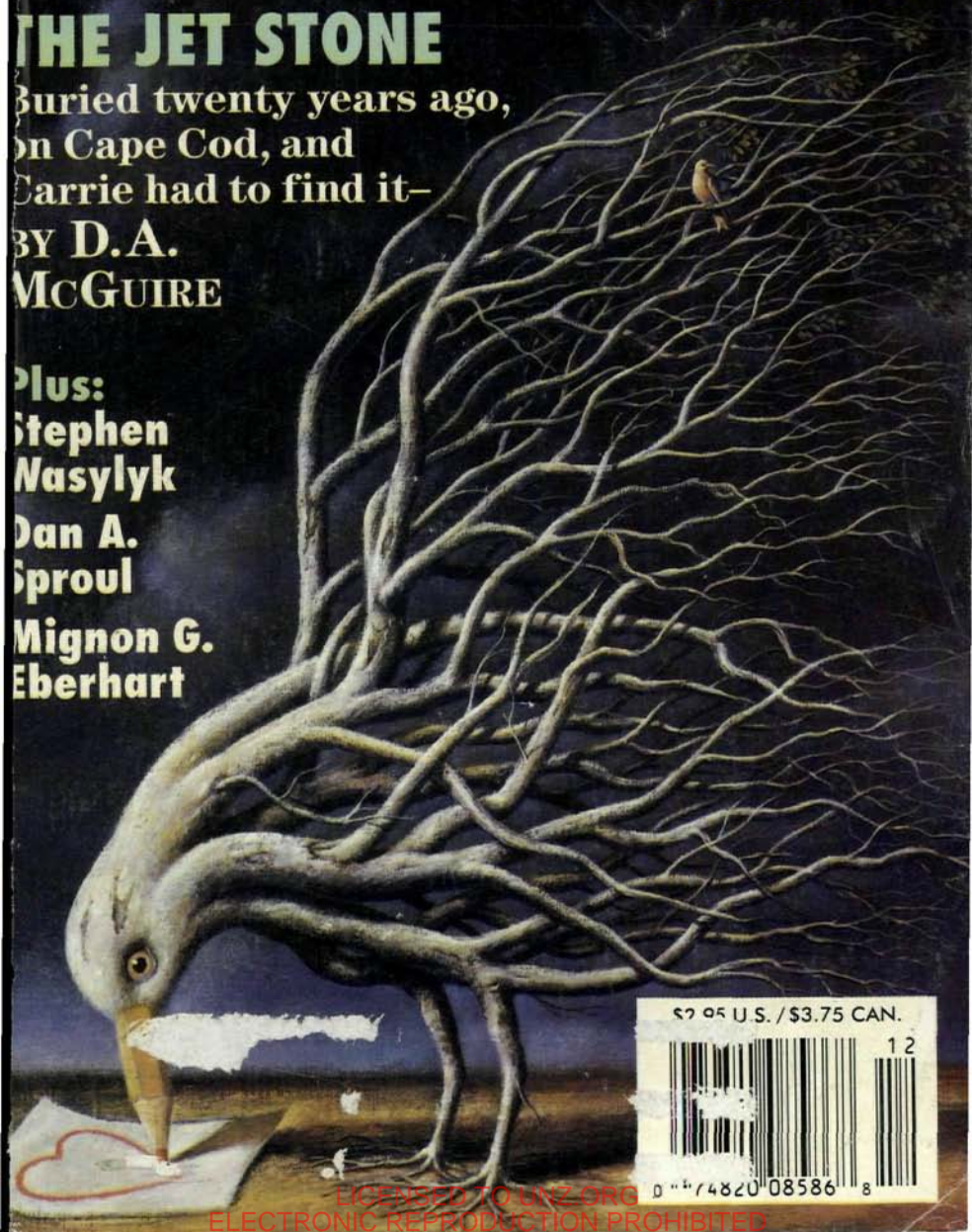
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BY D.A.
McGUIRE

Plus:
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Dan A.
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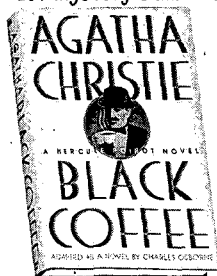


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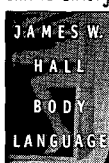
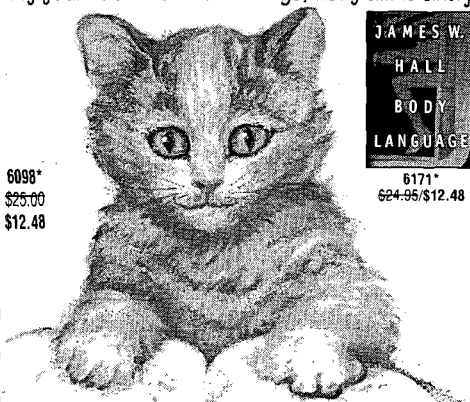
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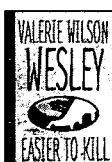
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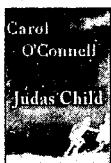
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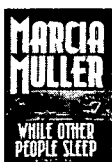
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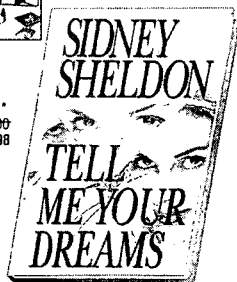
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

In this issue . . . Welcome to Ernest B. Brown, author of "Wings of Wax," his first published piece of fiction. Mr. Brown spent his first forty-two years after high school in the construction business—as laborer, carpenter's apprentice, carpenter, foreman, superintendent, estimator, and project manager—and recently added another occupation: college student. He has, he says, "the dubious honor of being the oldest matriculated English major at Bridgewater (Mass.) State College," where he is now a senior.

Welcome also to Bill Eidson, author of "The Stowaway." Now a fulltime writer, Mr. Eidson was formerly an advertising executive and is an enthusiastic sailor, photographer, scuba diver, and White Mountains hiker. He has written two other short stories and four novels, most recently *Adrenaline* (Forge Books, June).

During the 1980's AHMM pub-

lished eleven stories by Dan A. Sproul, most of them about the world of horseracing in Florida. Nine years later, Mr. Sproul is back with "All About Heroes," and we're delighted to say that we also have more stories on hand for future issues.

D. A. McGuire's "The Jet Stone," this issue's cover story, is set in Manamasset, Cape Cod, a place familiar to our readers through Ms. McGuire's Herbie Sawyer stories. This one, however, is the beginning of a new series, and although Herbie doesn't appear, Detective Sergeant Jake Valari briefly does. Watch for Carrie and Jake's further adventures, coming up in the spring.

Finally, sadly, this issue contains Stephen Wasylyk's last story (as we previously announced, he died in October 1996). "Never Anything Good in the Mail," vintage Wasylyk, is his one hundred forty-fourth story for AHMM. It was for us a great thirty years.

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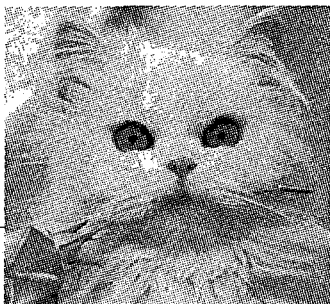
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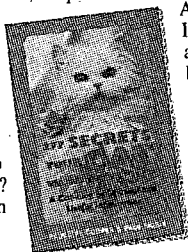
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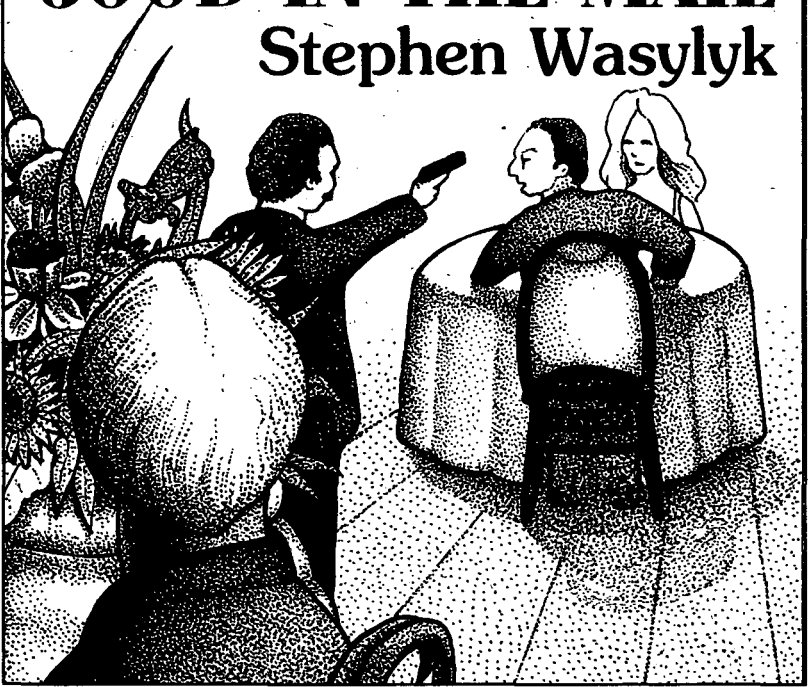
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NEVER ANYTHING GOOD IN THE MAIL

Stephen Wasylyk



Medlin divided his daily mail into two stacks, catalogues, solicitations, and other junk mail on his left; thinking that the surest way to immortality was to get on a mailing list. Once there, you'd exist forever, even though you hadn't sent in an order for years. Like his dead wife.

Envelopes that required his attention—his monthly bills—went on his right. There were three. Nothing personal, such as a card or note from his son or daughter

or a gaggle of relatives scattered about the world. If Hallmark had to depend on people like his family, it would be bankrupt.

Never anything good in the mail, he thought.

He carried the left-hand pile to the kitchen wastebasket and returned in time to see, through the big bay window Liz had liked so much, a luxury car pull up in front of the house.

Black finish streaked as though driven a long way.

The driver stepped out, stocky

and solid with a square face and closely trimmed graying hair, tie pulled down and collar open. He reached inside for his suitcoat, tossed it over a shoulder, opened the trunk to extract a large suitcase and a smaller one, slammed the trunk lid, picked up the luggage, and wearily started up the flagstone walk.

Never anything good at the front door either, thought Medlin.

He hesitated when the bell rang. He'd have to answer. The man would have seen his car in the open garage. He opened the door and flicked a glance up the street. The blue sedan was still there, parked near a big elm. It had been there since dawn.

The man picked up his luggage. "About time. Going to let me in or not?" Medlin stepped aside. The man entered, dropped his luggage in the small foyer, and looked around. "Not much better than your last house. My kid sister never had much taste."

The man's judgment was as deficient as his manners. Liz had spent a great deal of time and money on exactly the right sofa, chairs, tables, lamps, and piano, her decorating advice sought by her friends, one of whom had eagerly accepted the beautiful rosewood coffee table after Medlin tripped over it once too often after one too many drinks. The man grinned. "Don't see any touch but hers, though, which means you haven't acquired another wife."

Medlin folded his arms. "Just what in the hell do you want, Stan?"

Stan spread his hands. "Nothing but a room for a few nights. Got a little business to attend to on the East Coast, so I thought, why spend all that money on a motel or hotel room when I have a brother-in-law with a big empty house? Now, you know that if Liz was alive she'd welcome me with open arms."

That she would, thought Medlin. He was her big brother, and she idolized him, even though he ignored her cards, never answered her letters, was hardly subtle with his low opinion of Medlin, and never really acknowledged a brilliant niece and successful nephew. He'd visited once in thirty years, dragging along a bimbo he claimed was his wife. Without ever mentioning exactly what he did for a living—something to do with money, Medlin gathered—he'd left three days later after countless stories of how he'd put people from rude clerks to overbearing executives in their place. They knew who they were dealing with when he was through with them, by God.

Liz had brushed tears from worshipful eyes while waving goodbye. Medlin could only wonder how an intelligent, warm, gentle woman like his wife could have the same parents as a complete idiot on an ego trip since the day he'd been born.

He hadn't been surprised at all when Stan didn't show up for the funeral.

He was one step from throwing him and his luggage out the door when Liz's framed picture on the

piano caught his eye, her smile suddenly acquiring a reproachful cant. He jerked a thumb toward the stairs and started toward the kitchen. "You can use the room over the garage."

Stan followed. "Okay. Listen, I'm glad I caught you. I thought you might be at work."

"On vacation," he lied.

"Yeah? Still driving a bus?"

Very observant, Stan. Medlin had been tooling a bus when he and Liz had married thirty years ago, but a house in this neighborhood was above a driver's salary range. Medlin didn't bother to tell him he was now chief of the division.

He poured himself a cup of coffee. "Still driving."

Stan eyed the cup. "What do you have to eat?"

"What the hell do you think this is? A bed and breakfast with personal service? There's the refrigerator, the range, and the coffee pot. If you can't cook, chew on a stale muffin. Whatever you do, clean up after yourself."

Four eggs. Overdone. Four slices of toast, slightly burnt. Three cups of coffee. Wolfed down. Medlin wondered how long it had been since Stan had eaten.

He hadn't flown in. The car was no airport rental. It had been pushed from the West Coast with very few stops for food. Or rest for the driver. Stan's eyes were baggy and his face pale. Even though the house was cool, a film of sweat glistened on his forehead, and his hands trembled.

He didn't look well, but Medlin

had seen those symptoms in company employees seated before his desk, brought on by the knowledge that at best they'd be fired and at worst they'd go to jail.

Stan was guilty of something.

Medlin thought of the blue sedan. While he wanted no part of whatever trouble Stan was in, the man deserved no part of his.

He waited until Stan finished the dishes before he said, "I've changed my mind. You're in some kind of trouble, and I can't have you bringing it here. There's a motel about three miles away."

Stan put on a good act, eyes wide with surprise. "I'm not in trouble. What makes you think that?" Medlin said nothing. Stan walked to the kitchen window, his hands thrust into his back pockets, riveted there as if eighty-five-year-old Roseann Johns, trimming her rosebushes in the back yard across the way, was a Las Vegas showgirl. "I don't have the cash for a motel," he said.

"Everyone has credit cards."

"Can't use mine. They've been maxed out."

Possible, thought Medlin, but it was equally likely he couldn't use them because they left a paper trail. Stan turned. "As a matter of fact, I was going to hit you up for a few dollars so I can make my appointment tomorrow. Gas in the car is pretty low."

I was right, thought Medlin. The cash had gone for fuel and Big Macs, and toward the end of the trip, the Big Macs had taken second place.

"Stan, I think you're running

away from someone or something," he said softly. "I don't want to know who or what. That's your business. If I'm wrong, say so, but don't feed me one of your creative lies." He waited. Stan said nothing. "Now, let me explain something you might not have thought of. It's no secret that the first place to look for someone who has taken off is the home of a relative. A relative will often take you in when no one else will. Sometimes hide you, feed you, lie for you, give you money. I'm sure you did something to throw them off, but it really won't matter. Since I'm a relative, they'll come here to look around just to be sure. My advice is, don't be here."

Stan propped his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands. "You don't understand. I have to be here for a day or two."

"No, you don't. You're afraid to use your credit cards and have no money. Okay. I'll hit the MAC machine for a few hundred, and you can be on your way."

Stan jumped to his feet, knocking the chair over. *"I said I have to be here, you moron! Not at a motel, not next door. Here! I never thought you were too bright, never knew what Liz saw in you, but even a damned bus driver should be able to understand the English lang—"*

His eyes grew wide, his jaw hung open before it snapped shut in a grimace. He clutched at his chest and extended the other hand toward Medlin as if begging for help before he toppled like a tree chainsawed at the base.

Medlin, having seen it before and knowing exactly what it was, leaped to the phone and dialed 911 almost before Stan hit the floor. He ran to the front door, threw it wide for the medics, ran back and began CPR, knowing it would do as little good this time as it had the last. Liz's family specialized in massive heart attacks. Something in the genes he hoped his children hadn't inherited.

Medlin flipped through the wallet Steele handed him after they carted Stan off to the hospital. No question he was dead, but an M.D.'s signature on a certificate was required to make it official.

The wallet held a twenty and two singles—Stan wasn't kidding when he said he was low on cash—four credit cards, one gold—if they were maxed out, he really owed a bundle—his driver's license, car registration, and a medical insurance card due to expire next week. At least his final bill would be covered.

He handed it back to Steele. "This is better in the hands of a detective-lieutenant than mine. Since we hadn't heard from him in years, I don't know if he was still married. If he was, her opinion of me wouldn't be any higher than his, and I wouldn't like to be accused of taking his money."

"You'd rather have her accuse us, is that it? I tell you, Medlin, this thing scared the hell out of me. The two I have watching from the house across the street

saw him arrive. Hit men don't generally show up with luggage, so they figured you knew him, but when the 911 call came, I thought they'd screwed up for sure and you were on your way to the hospital. Surprised to find it was your brother-in-law. All the years I've known you, we've never had many memorable conversations, but I'll never forget the one after Liz's funeral when you expressed your opinion of him. I assume you're not really stricken with grief. If I'm wrong, no offense intended."

"None taken. His dying wouldn't change what I thought of him. If anything, his coming here to impose on a man he'd sneered at for thirty years and then having the bad manners to drop dead in my kitchen confirms it."

Steele grinned. "You're a hard man, Medlin."

"But a fair one."

"I've taken the information from his cards, so I'll have the L.A. police break the news to the widow if there is one, and since you had the impression he was on the run, I'll have them look into that, too."

Medlin flicked a finger at Stan's car. "I suggest you have that towed to the impound yard until you find out who owns it now."

"I'll also take care of things at the hospital, but if no one in L.A. claims the body—"

"You know what Liz would want me to do."

Medlin glanced up the street. The excitement had not only brought out the neighbors but driven off the blue sedan.

"There was a blue sedan parked up the street all morning. Yours?"

Steele cursed softly. "Hell, no. We wouldn't be that obvious, and the two across the street would be enough. Are you telling me they never noticed?"

Medlin felt a chill. He was willing to be bait in a trap, but being killed wasn't part of it. If he'd exposed himself by walking out to meet Stan, the blue sedan could have raced by, a shotgun or automatic weapon poked out of the window, and he'd have been Swiss cheese while Stan wouldn't have lived long enough for his heart to fail.

"Probably couldn't see it because of the trees."

"If it shows up again, I'll—"

"Leave it or they'll come up with something else. I'll keep an eye open for it, and as they say, better the devil you know than the one you don't."

They argued for a half hour before Steele agreed.

He gestured toward the bay window.

"Doesn't that thing have a blind or something?"

"Just the curtains." Liz had shopped a long time for those curtains; closely woven and translucent, allowing light but no detail.

"Then keep them closed and the light low after dark. Remember, after you testify tomorrow, it will all be over."

Thank heaven for that. The trouble a man could get into merely by being in the wrong place at the wrong time—

He'd grown tired of preparing his own dinners and of small eateries where the food was just that: food. Hasty preparation, either tasteless or highly spiced. Tired too of dinner's being nothing more than an hour break on the route between office and home. If he bothered at all and didn't simply substitute a bottle.

So he began treating himself to a night out; showering, shaving, dressing as if he had a date, and making a reservation at one of the finer restaurants, where he could sit and pretend Liz was across from him. And perhaps in a way she was and that was why he'd started the routine.

She'd always liked The Stone Inn, which she considered romantic because it was small and intimate and had a glass-enclosed terrace that overlooked the lights in the valley.

He always selected the early evening and the off nights, when the restaurants would be more receptive to a reservation for one, and the maître d' had hidden him behind a potted plant in a corner of the terrace, probably to get him in and out before a romantic pair arrived.

The two other early diners, however, were in the center of the terrace. The man's back was to him. The woman—tall, ash blonde, sculpted face, big blue eyes highlighted by just a touch of liner, white dress low cut and clinging, set off by gold earrings—was not the spouse of an everyday wage earner.

He'd no more than started his salad when a man walked in, stopped five feet from the couple, and said something, his voice furious. The man half rose, cutting off Medlin's impression of terror on the woman's face. And then the gun coughed and the half-risen man fell, taking the table down and revealing the white dress of the woman blossoming with blood. All so fast that Medlin was frozen, his fork halfway to his lips as he watched the man walk out, his image etched forever in his memory. And he knew the man hadn't seen him sitting there or he'd have been dead, too.

A restaurant like that, double killing like that, naturally Steele had shown up to take charge and found Medlin, his basketball buddy of years ago, the only eyewitness. They'd made a good combination; Steele chunky but fast, Medlin tall and lanky with a sure touch. And remained friends long after the last ball hit the hoop.

Hours later in Steele's office Medlin lifted a cup of coffee, looking down at the concentric ripples caused by his shaking hand. Describing the coldblooded shooting of two people for various officials did nothing for the nerves.

He'd made his statement, been questioned by an assistant D.A., selected the man out of a lineup, and was finally ready to go home, never having had the dinner he'd looked forward to but not hungry at all. "I suppose you can tell me what it was all about now," he said.

"An old story. Husband shoots

unfaithful wife and her lover. Didn't exhibit much judgment. He should have caught them in bed and hoped for a sympathetic jury. Walking into a restaurant where he's well known—"Steele spread his hands. "Although he must have done a little thinking along the way. By the time we picked him up, the gun was gone. He must have used latex gloves because there was no powder residue on his hands. Didn't happen to notice that, did you?"

"You must be joking. How much can you notice in ten seconds?"

"You had no trouble with the lineup."

"If I live to be ninety, I'll never forget his face."

"Speaking about living a long life, I have to tell you what you'll be up against. I'm sure the name means nothing to you, but your killer is Nickolai Zumodov."

"Sounds like a Russian ballet dancer who defected."

"You should hope. Ponder this, my friend. If Nicky had seen you, you'd be dead. That's an oversight his father will try to rectify. Boris is a Russian emigré who was amazed to find how difficult it is to convict someone of a crime in this country, in contrast to his, where you disappeared if they only suspected you were guilty. All he needed was brains, toughness, ruthlessness, and the right lawyers. He is now worth many rubles. The strange part is that Nicky didn't follow in his father's footsteps. As far as we know, he's never had anything to do with

any of his father's rackets. Led a nice, law-abiding life as a stockbroker, although he'd have to know someone who could get a silenced automatic for him. Probably one of his two brothers, both of whom are far better candidates to commit murder."

"You're trying to tell me something here."

"What I'm trying to tell you is that on the stand you'll be facing the best defense attorney money can buy, even if Boris has to import him from Pluto."

"They have attorneys on Pluto?"

"Like fungi, lawyers exist everywhere. Did you have a drink while waiting to be served?"

"One."

"Count on the guy's doing his best to have the jury believe you were so bombed you wouldn't recognize your mother if she walked in, especially after he learns about your drinking episodes since Liz died. But worse than that, if Boris doesn't think the lawyer can discredit you, he'll go to Plan B."

"Which is?"

"Prevent you from testifying at all. Because, Medlin, you're in the unlucky position of being the only witness who saw him do the actual shooting. The others can only testify that Nicky was in the restaurant."

At dusk Medlin peeked through the bay window curtain. The blue car hadn't returned after the neighborhood had sunk into its usual tranquility. The spot had been taken by a small

red one. Probably belonged to a neighbor's kid. Two-car garages and long driveways intended to eliminate street parking were not enough at houses where sixteen-year-olds acquired a car along with their driver's licenses. Cramming them into the driveways meant playing musical cars when someone wanted to leave, so the local ordinance against street parking at night was ignored.

Above the car and between the houses and trees he could see the high embankment of the interstate, where the headlights of the homeward bound flowed by steadily, fortunately far enough away so that the constant hum had never disturbed him as it had the closer neighbors.

A figure emerged from the house across the street and casually crossed; one of Steele's men heading for Medlin's back yard now that it was growing dark. The other man would follow in a few minutes to cover the front, while Steele himself would join Medlin inside later.

And just then, with one man already behind the house, and the other yet to appear, a car pulled up, and a man left it to come up the walk to ring the bell as Stan had that morning.

Medlin hesitated. With no idea who the man was, he had no reason to open the door at all, yet the caller could be an innocent walking into the center of something he knew absolutely nothing about—like Medlin himself in the restaurant. After Medlin

had told Steele of the phone call, the lieutenant was certain that Plan B was in operation.

Zumodov would try to kill him, and tonight was his last chance.

The voice had been deep and resonant, with just a trace of an accent.

"Mr. Medlin? If I could take a moment of your time?"

Insurance, double-glazed windows, siding, or a marvelous stock-market opportunity, thought Medlin, knowing it was really none of them. "Go ahead," he said.

"You are to testify against a man named Nicky Zumodov. I understand how you can feel it to be your civic duty, and under different circumstances I might agree with you. But what you witnessed was not the act of a crazed killer, a menace to society. It will never be repeated. Nicky is a good boy. It was a matter of honor, primitive perhaps but still a matter of honor. Do you understand honor, Mr. Medlin?"

"Perhaps our definitions aren't the same."

"As a proud man descended from a long line of proud men, Nicky Zumodov had no choice."

"The hell he didn't—" began Medlin.

"You are wrong, Mr. Medlin. Nicky had given those people his entire love and trust, and they betrayed him. A divorce would not be satisfactory because it would not restore him to the man he was. The act was not wrong. The circumstances were. Another time

would have been far more suitable. But all is not lost. You have an obligation to betrayed men everywhere, Mr. Medlin. Do not take it upon yourself to punish this man. What he did was justified."

"You have the wrong idea of our court system," said Medlin slowly. "I merely tell what I saw. The judge and jury determine if what he did was justified and what the punishment should be."

"I suppose you are adamant?"

"Adamant has nothing to do with it. I have no choice."

It sounded as though the man sighed. "Then you force me to do something I do not wish to do, Mr. Medlin, because I know you are merely a pawn of Fate. Unfortunately, pawns are meant to be sacrificed."

The doorbell rang again. Get rid of him, Medlin told himself. Remembering Steele's warning about bright lights, he switched on a decorative table lamp and opened the door.

The man was his height and build but with straight black hair and an aquiline face with a narrow, precisely clipped mustache. Definitely an Hispanic but not from any barrio. The dark suit was expensive, the shirt snowy, the tie more expensive than any Medlin would ever own.

"Mr. Medlin? I'm a friend of Stan's. Is he here?"

He glided into the house before Medlin could prevent him. Stan's luggage was still near the foot of the stairs. "I see he is," he said.

"He was," said Medlin. "Right now he's at the hospital a few miles from here. Waiting to be autopsied."

"Dead? How did it happen, Mr. Medlin?"

"Heart."

"Ah. Obviously too much stress. It couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow, but that doesn't solve my problem. Stan had something that belonged to me, and I came to reclaim it."

Medlin flicked a finger.

"There's his luggage, just as he brought it in. If it's there, you're welcome to it. Just be neat. I don't like cleaning up after people."

A smile flashed. "Neither do I, Mr. Medlin, especially someone like Stan."

He pulled the luggage closer to the lamp and went through it quickly and thoroughly, piling the clothes in a heap and carefully examining the cases themselves, bending and kneading the soft leather. "Not here."

"He might have left it in his car."

"Where is that?"

"At the police impound lot."

"Ah well, I really don't think Stan would have left it there. He'd have wanted it close at hand. There is one other possibility." The eyes narrowed. "He gave it to you. And if he didn't, you took it after he died."

"Guess again." Medlin pointed at the clothing. "That's all he brought in other than the clothes on his back. There was nothing else to give me or for me to take, so I guess you'll have to give your

problem a little more thought. But not here. You've stretched my hospitality to the limit. *Mi casa is not su casa.*"

The man seemed amused.

"I'm afraid I can't leave yet, Mr. Medlin. Look at it my way. You were very willing to have me go through his luggage because you knew it wasn't there. Stan would have kept it with him, so he'd have brought it in. I repeat—he gave it to you or you took it after he died. If you'll give it to me, I'll go."

Medlin spread his hands. "I'm sorry I can't say it in Spanish for you. Whatever it is, I—don't—have—it."

The man unbuttoned his coat, and a dull gray automatic appeared in his hand.

"Please. No reason for you to be stubborn, Mr. Medlin. It isn't worth losing your kneecaps over."

What did I do to deserve this? thought Medlin. I mind my own business and lead a quiet life. My only sin is offending the gods of sobriety now and then, yet a brother-in-law I never liked drops dead in my kitchen, a Russian gangster wants to kill me, and now a loony Latino hit man intends to cripple me for life over something I know nothing about.

"Something you should know," he said. "Of all the households in America, you walked into the only one that has a policeman out back, one out front, and a detective lieutenant due to arrive any minute. Fire that gun and you won't get two feet from the door."

The grin again as the man

sidestepped to get a clearer shot. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I wouldn't lie with my kneecaps at stake."

The automatic slanted toward Medlin's knees. "Last chance, Mr. Medlin."

No doubt at all that the man meant it. Four things happened to Medlin simultaneously—his brain went into a deep freeze, he broke into a cold sweat, his knees started to shake, and he swore he'd never touch another drop.

And in thinking about it afterward, he could only conclude that while the other four things seemed to have happened simultaneously, they had to have occurred in the following order—

1. Lights began to flash in the bay window behind the gunman.

2. The two lamps on automatic timer so that he wouldn't come home to a dark house—and that he'd forgotten about completely—clicked on, brightening the room considerably.

3. Steele walked through the door, saw the gunman, yelled, and dived to the side while reaching for his own gun as the automatic swung toward him.

4. The bay window shattered with a roar, and the gunman pitched violently forward in a shower of glass.

Zumodov's defense attorney wasn't from Pluto. He was a big fat All-American, with three strands of hair combed over his bald spot, who wanted Medlin off

the stand and forgotten by the jury as quickly as possible, so Medlin testified and had lunch with a sleepless Steele, who had spent all night looking for an explanation.

Stan, Steele said, had worked for a sleazy import/export firm from which he'd skimmed quite a bit of money. When he sensed his luck had run out, he fled, taking with him something—the guess was a computer printout—under the delusion that it would preserve his well-being. The Hispanic hit man had been sent after him.

"What was his name?" asked Medlin.

"Any Spanish one you can think of since he's used them all, including José Carreras."

"One of the three tenors? He had a sense of humor."

"He was also very compassionate. If you hadn't told him what he wanted to know after he shot out your knees, he wouldn't have left you to suffer. He'd have put a bullet in your brain. No idea where what he wanted might be?"

"No more than last night. Since I doubt you could have reached your gun in time, what saved us?"

"Zumodov, although we can't prove a thing. You have to admire his planning in a way. We're thinking he'd try to take you out up close, but he's thinking long-range. We found the weeds matted down by a rifleman on the embankment of the interstate. Might be three hundred yards or so, not too difficult for a good man

with a scope. But in the dark he had to be certain he had the right house and the right window. So they checked the line of sight with the blue car you saw in the morning, stole the red one, rigged it so the emergency flashers could be set off by remote control, and parked it in the same spot."

"On a direct line with my window."

"Right. An assistant stays with the car parked on the berm of the interstate with the hood up in case a cop car comes along. The sharpshooter climbs down, settles in and sets off the emergency flashers. The window above those blinking lights is yours. He draws a bead, your timed lights come on, and there's a nice silhouette that has to be you. Pow. He goes back and tells Zumodov mission accomplished. You probably didn't notice, but when Zumodov saw you in court this morning, he looked as though he'd swallowed some bad caviar. The next body that turns up will probably be that of the sharpshooter. But it's all over now. I only hope that tottering on the edge of eternity was enough to make you stop feeling sorry for yourself and get back to a normal existence."

Steele had picked up the check. "I'm paying this only because you're on the hook for the funeral. The man's ex-wife suggested we turn his body over to garbage disposal."

He arrived home as the workmen were finishing the repair of the bay window. Liz's beautiful

Oriental rug would also have to be replaced, since the the stains the Hispanic had left could never be removed. Neither could the thousands of minute slivers of glass.

As they were gathering up their tools, the foreman of the work crew handed him his mail. "Don't want to forget this, Mr. Medlin."

The usual packet, except for a package the size of a shoebox wrapped in brown paper. No return address. Maybe Zumodov had sent him a package bomb, but the postmark said Los Angeles. Stan was the only person there who might send him a package, but why should Stan send him anything?

Then he remembered Stan shouting, "I have to be *here*, you moron!"

Of course. Because he'd really sent the package to himself, not to Medlin. He slit the wrapping, slid it off, and removed the box lid.

Money. Bills tightly crammed the full length of the box. He worked a half-inch thick wad out. Hundred dollar notes. No idea of the total, but Stan wouldn't have had to worry about being unemployed.

He wondered why the man hadn't used an offshore or Swiss bank account instead of accumulating cash. No way to know now. Maybe his employers were capable of checking that type of transaction.

On the other hand, it wouldn't be too easy to go through life pay-

ing your bills with hundred dollar notes.

He walked over to the piano to his wife's photo and stood with his hands on his hips.

Well, he was your brother, you know, and it was his money, even if he did steal it. What should I do with it?

He cocked his head as if he'd heard an answer and went back to the money. He mentally calculated the cost of a decent funeral, gravesite, and stone for Stan, the repair of the window and the replacement of the rug, removed fifteen thousand dollars, thought about the rug, made it twenty, and divided the balance into two stacks.

The two large padded mailing envelopes were in Liz's desk—she was always mailing a small gift to someone. He addressed one to her church and the other to the local SPCA. Her two big interests. He crammed the money into them. Let Stan's ill-gotten gains be used for the benefit of needy people and animals. Medlin looked down at the floor. Scream all you want to, Stan.

He slid the folded computer printout jammed beneath the money into a third envelope addressed to the district attorney in Los Angeles and stood for a moment, regarding the three envelopes and feeling as though a door had been closed in his life, before separating the rest of the correspondence addressed to him.

As usual. Never anything good in the mail.

FICTION

A MASTER OF GO

I. J. Parker



Illustration by Ray Basham

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/98

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The proper method . . . was to lose all awareness of self while awaiting an adversary's play.

Yasunari Kawabata, *The Master of Go*

HEIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN, LONG-NIGHTS MONTH (OCTOBER).

Under the bridge a pair of ducks bobbed for food among the drifting leaves, taking turns so that one of them could keep a wary eye on the human watching them. A cuckoo burst into sudden song in one of the willows. "Ho-to-to. Ho-to-to." Looking up, Akitada saw the bird swaying on a slender branch. Sun-bright yellow against the pale blue of the morning sky, the willow's leaves seemed to drift as gently in the breeze as their fallen companions below bobbed in the current of the canal. Heaving a deep sigh of satisfaction, Akitada decided that he had achieved the proper frame of mind for his *go* lesson and crossed the bridge.

The *go*-master Nakamura was very poor and gave his lessons in the art of the ancient board game in the back room of an old inn because his house had become nearly uninhabitable. The inn was near the university in a pleasant, quiet street within a block of broad Suzaku Avenue. The inn's clientele was quiet and genteel, its service excellent, and the back room had the sort of elegance and peacefulness never found in ordinary inns.

But when Akitada turned the corner from Suzaku Avenue, he saw that a small crowd had gathered before the inn's gate. A number of red-coated constables with bows and quivers of arrows looped over their shoulders were just disappearing into the courtyard.

His peace of mind gone, Akitada hurried after them. Nobody was about in the reception area, so he removed his boots quickly and followed the sound of raised voices. With sudden apprehension, Akitada recognized the gruff tone of Captain Kobe, commander of the municipal police of the capital.

The chief of the metropolitan police would not have been called out for a minor matter.

They had met before, collided would be a better term, but always on murder investigations. Kobe was a conscientious and dedicated official but not particularly imaginative or patient, often charging like a bull after the most obvious solutions. Consequently Akitada had interceded in more than one of Kobe's cases until the captain had developed an intense aversion to his meddling.

Kobe and his men had not bothered to remove their boots and were making a lot of noise. Akitada, moving silently on stocking feet, caught up with them at the door to the back room. Itto, the short, monkey-faced innkeeper, and a middle-aged, tearful maid were talking anxiously, but the captain shoved them aside impatiently and dis-

appeared into the back room followed by his constables. Akitada slipped in behind them.

The inn's back room had the simple elegance of old palace rooms. Its floor and beams were dark with age, and the grass mats had turned a deep golden color. When paper-covered screens were pushed open, the occupants had a view of a charming enclosed garden with an ancient stone lantern. At the moment the garden was bright with sunshine and color. Golden chrysanthemums and brilliant red maple leaves spread against the brown bamboo fence like embroidery on a woman's festive gown.

The scene inside was stark, though it was colorful enough with the red coats of the police. But death has a sobering effect. Nakamura, black-robed and whitehaired, lay beside his *go* board. He had died painfully. His body was twisted, the formal gown gaping to reveal thin, age-spotted legs and a glimpse of white loincloth. He had vomited some green, blood-flecked substance over the front of his dark robe and onto the grass mat. His hands were clenched, and the normally handsome, thin face was a mask of agony, a swollen tongue protruding from blue lips.

Sadly Akitada stepped forward to pull the robe down over the spindly, knotted limbs. A friend, newly-found and irretrievably lost! "Sugawara!"

Akitada raised his eyes and bowed. "Good morning, captain. A most unhappy occasion, but I am glad to see you looking well."

"What are you doing here?" Kobe's manner was stiff.

"I came for my lesson," Akitada said mildly. He bent again to feel Nakamura's hand. It was still faintly warm.

"Don't touch anything!" Kobe stepped between him and the body. "What do you mean, you came for a lesson?"

Akitada indicated the *go* board. "Master Nakamura was a teacher of the game of *go*. I am one of his pupils. What happened?"

Kobe was clearly torn between getting rid of Akitada and finding out what his connection with the dead man was. He gave in with an ill grace. "Very well. Sit down over there, and keep quiet. When we're done, you can answer some questions."

Akitada obeyed meekly. He watched and listened as Kobe investigated. One of the red-coated policemen set up a small portable desk and took notes as Kobe walked around the room dictating his observations. He noted location, time of day and date, the identity of the victim, and contents of the room. Then he knelt by the body, commenting on its appearance and presumed time and cause of death.

Apparently Nakamura had died from ingesting poison of some kind, as recently as an hour ago.

Kobe paused in his dictation to pick up a cup that lay near the dead man's hand, sniffed, and tasted the dregs. Making a face, he went out

on the verandah to spit into the shrubbery. He returned to inspect the pot used to heat the water and opened a small container of powdered tea. The water was pronounced harmless, but the box must have appeared suspicious, for it was carefully wrapped up and handed to his associate.

Akitada noted all of this with the intense interest a sudden death always aroused in him. Suicide could be eliminated because the master had clearly not expected to die in the middle of his lessons, and an accident was most unlikely under the circumstances. On the other hand, Akitada reflected, Nakamura was also an unlikely murder victim. Much beloved among his friends and disciples, he was a poor man without the worldly goods or political influence to appeal to a killer's greed. At his advanced age he would hardly inspire a crime of passion. That left only anger, revenge, or envy as motives, and for any of these, Kobe would have to probe Nakamura's personal life. Akitada waited for Kobe's next move.

Kobe called in the landlord and the maid.

Itto, with his worried frown and nervous manner more than ever like a small monkey, was still wringing his hands. He avoided looking at the body or the policemen. Instead he addressed Akitada. "Oh, sir," he cried, "who could have done such a dreadful thing to such a fine gentleman?"

Kobe snapped, "Hey! I'm in charge here. Who found the body?"

"I did, sir. I immediately sent for you."

"Did you touch anything?"

"No. Only Master Nakamura." Kobe glowered, and Itto added quickly, "To make sure he was dead."

Kobe glanced at the kneeling figure of the maid. "Did she make the tea?"

The maid cried, "Oh no, sir. I would not dare!"

Kobe turned to Itto. "Well, who did?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What do you mean, you don't know!" roared Kobe. "You must know. This is your inn."

"This maid usually leaves the things in the morning. The master or his visitors make the tea."

Kobe advanced on the cowering maid. "Is that correct? Come on, woman! I don't have all day!"

The maid started to weep again. "Every morning," she sobbed, "I put out the cups and the master's tea caddy. Then I fill the pot. I filled it at the well, letting the water flow a long time. Just as the master said."

Kobe stared at her suspiciously, then asked the innkeeper, "Who were the master's visitors this morning?"

Sweat beaded Itto's wrinkled brow. "I don't know," he said. "We

were busy with the preparations for Major Counsellor Ishikawa's birthday party tonight."

Kobe glared. "Stop lying! Do you expect me to believe that nobody paid any attention to the comings and goings in an inn?"

"Nobody. We were much too busy," Itto wailed, casting a beseeching glance at Akitada. "If I hadn't passed by the open door of this room on my way to the convenience, I would not have found the body."

Kobe's face turned dark with anger, and Akitada cleared his throat.

"What?" snapped Kobe, glowering at him.

"The lessons had become well established," Akitada explained. "And Nakamura disliked interruptions."

"Then give me the names of all his students!"

Akitada shook his head regretfully. "I have no idea who they are."

"Didn't Nakamura keep records?"

"Perhaps." Akitada was becoming irritated with Kobe's manner. "No doubt," he said coldly, "you will discover more during the coming days after searching his home and talking to all his friends."

Kobe frowned. "You must know something. Surely Nakamura discussed his other students? Some casual comment like, 'That dunce Ishikawa will never learn the simplest moves?'"

Akitada was shocked. "Never. And certainly not in those terms. It would have been most improper to make such a comment about another gentleman."

Kobe, who had worked his way up from the ranks of the military and preferred commoners to the aristocracy, snarled, "Well, one of you 'proper' gentlemen killed the old man. Frankly, I don't give a rat's turd for what you so-called 'good' people consider proper. You think nothing of poisoning each other, but heaven forbid you should criticize someone's game."

Akitada hesitated, then nodded. "You are quite right. It is a curious phenomenon, if you put it that way. On the other hand, I doubt all of the master's pupils belonged to the 'good' people."

"Since you appear to have no useful information," Kobe told Akitada coldly, "you can leave."

"I would like to stay."

"No! You have meddled enough in my cases." Kobe's eyes flashed dangerously, his color rising again.

"As you wish." Akitada sighed and rose. "May I just take a look at the game?" Without waiting for permission, he went to the *go* board with its arrangement of black and white stones. "A race!" he murmured. "And such a brief one! Ten black stones and nine white ones." Peering into the bowl of game pieces next to the master's seat, he asked Kobe, "Did you notice that the master was playing black?"

"What are you dithering about?" snapped Kobe.

"I gather you do not play the game?"

"No! I have better things to do."

"You would be surprised how pertinent the strategy is to your type of work. The object of both endeavors is capture, and overcoming an opponent requires careful thought and a good knowledge of his personality. Consider, for example, the peculiar fact that the master played black on this occasion."

"I have no time for this nonsense. This is a criminal investigation, not a game. Are you leaving?"

"Captain, normally the weaker of two players plays the black because it gives him the advantage of the first move. The master always plays the white against his students."

Kobe's eyes widened. "You mean his last visitor was not one of his students?"

"Exactly. He would play black only against someone equal or better. And so far as I know there are only two other people who claim to equal his skill. One is Lord Mononobe, undersecretary of the crown prince's private office, the other Reverend Raishin, abbot of the Hojo temple."

Kobe's face fell. "You cannot seriously expect me to accuse either of *them* on such flimsy evidence."

Akitada raised his brows. "I thought you had little regard for the 'good' people. No, I was not actually suggesting that. We do not know when the poison was introduced into the tea."

Kobe threw up his hands in disgust. "So all that clever deduction was a waste of time! If that is all you have to contribute, Sugawara, we can dispense with your advice. Please leave and let the professionals get on with their work. And, for once, stay out of my case!"

"Of course." Akitada drifted towards the door. "It was an easy win for black," he muttered, shaking his head. "Too easy!"

Kobe looked after Akitada, shaking his head. Then he turned, glared at the game board and gave it a kick. The stones scattered across the mat.

Akitada grieved over the loss of his teacher, but he stayed out of the case, reminding himself to wait patiently for his chance, as Nakamura had often told him during their lessons. Soon there would be developments that would lead him to the killer.

But he attended the master's funeral. It was a grey day threatening rain. Most of Nakamura's students and friends had come, their grief tempered by curiosity. They were watching the glowering, red-coated Kobe uneasily. Both of Nakamura's closest contenders for the master's title were there as well. The abbot, Raishin, recited a short prayer, and the heavysset Lord Mononobe from the crown prince's staff knelt in the front row, his broad, flat features a mask of tear-stained sorrow.

After the ceremony Kobe took Akitada aside. Characteristically, he did not refer to their unpleasant parting but plunged directly into his subject. "We got absolutely nothing from searching Nakamura's place and next to nothing from talking to his friends," he remarked, as if they were merely continuing a friendly chat. "If you listen to them, he was a saint. Only the maid at the inn didn't like him. It seems Nakamura was always complaining about the service. When I asked her about the tea water, she was as skittish as a horse. But it may be nothing. It really comes down to Nakamura's last visitor. I thought about what you said and have a good mind to question Mononobe."

In spite of his earlier qualms Kobe was truly unmoved by questions of rank when he suspected someone of murder. In fact, this was one of the captain's qualities that Akitada respected. "I see," he said, glancing at the rotund undersecretary struggling to climb into his carriage while servants hovered near. "Do you have some new evidence?"

Kobe looked a little uneasy. "Nothing I'd like to share with a judge. Mononobe seems to be one of those fools who get so obsessed with a game that nothing else matters. People say he hated old man Nakamura because he was the acknowledged master and Mononobe couldn't beat him. He was always begging Nakamura for a game."

Akitada started to say something but closed his mouth again. Patience!

"Oh! And the other one you mentioned, the abbot? Well, he was on a pilgrimage. No doubt praying for better luck." Kobe chewed his lip in indecision. Then he stamped his foot. "It's got to be Mononobe. I'm taking him to headquarters. You can come along, Sugawara. I may need you to explain your reasoning."

Before Akitada could protest, Kobe stalked off towards Lord Mononobe's carriage, shouting, "Wait!"

His lordship was, of course, outraged to be taken so unceremoniously to police headquarters in front of everybody. He blustered at Kobe about his rank and position at court, waving his arms about and threatening official complaints.

This produced the opposite reaction from the one intended. Kobe made him an exaggerated bow, intoning, "I regret to inform the honored undersecretary that Your Lordship has been identified as the last person to see Nakamura alive." Changing his tone abruptly, he growled, "Under the circumstances I don't care who you say you are. As far as I'm concerned you're the prime suspect in the murder."

Lord Mononobe's eyes opened wide and went to Akitada in sudden comprehension. "I see," he said. Sitting down, he arranged his fat jowls into an expression of patient suffering. "It is true that I may have been the last person to see Nakamura alive, but I certainly did not kill him."

"Aha!" His bluff having paid off so handsomely, Kobe's eyes began

to sparkle, and his mustache bristled with satisfaction. "Why did you not come forward and report your visit?" he snapped.

Mononobe was cooperation itself. "My dear captain, allow me to explain what happened," he said. "First, I swear I did not poison Nakamura. What motive would I possibly have to kill our beloved master? I am a devotee myself."

"I don't care how devoted you are. I think you were jealous of him. Perhaps you lost one game too many and killed him in a fit of anger," said Kobe.

"Nonsense! I was very upset when he became ill. Then he went into convulsions and I wanted to go find a doctor, but he died before I could do so. It was very quick. Then I remembered the tea. I looked at the cup and saw grains of a white powder in the sediment. I am afraid I panicked. A man in my position in the crown prince's household cannot afford to become involved in scandal, so I left."

Kobe glared. "Why should I believe that?"

Lord Mononobe drew himself up with dignity. "You need not believe anything I say, but you cannot hold me, for you have no proof that I put the poison in his cup."

"You withheld evidence," Kobe pointed out. "That's enough for an arrest."

"Not for a man in my position. I have explained that. I shall cooperate fully in the future."

"Why did you visit Nakamura?"

"Just a friendly call. I was in the neighborhood. He suggested a quick game, and I agreed."

"He suggested it?" Akitada asked, surprised. "What sort of game?"

Kobe snapped, "Never mind that!" Turning back to his lordship, he asked, "What about the tea?"

"He made it and offered me some, but I refused. So he drank it himself."

"Lucky you!" Kobe sneered, but with less conviction.

"That was entirely uncalled for, captain," Mononobe protested.

"Did you see his previous caller?"

There was an almost imperceptible pause, then Mononobe said, "He was alone when I entered the room."

Akitada asked from his corner, "But perhaps you recognized someone in the corridor or leaving by the gate?"

Mononobe flushed and fidgeted. "A lot of people go to the inn. It means nothing."

Kobe leaned forward. "You saw someone! Out with it! Who was it?"

Mononobe sighed. "Just one of the students from the university. I cannot remember his name."

"Describe him."

Mononobe supplied a surprisingly detailed description of a thin

young man with narrow, pointed features, small mustache, and furtive manner. Somewhat mollified, Kobe let him go.

"Well, it looks like you were wrong after all," Kobe pointed out, quite unfairly, when they were alone. "Mononobe just didn't want to get involved. Still, I got another lead. And a good description! Reminds me of a ferret. Of course, most of those bookish types look like that. You know who it is?"

"No."

"Well, you haven't been much help. It's our crude methods that get results. Mononobe came apart quite easily."

"Remarkably easily."

"You think he lied?"

"Not about the ferret, I think." Akitada got up. "Since I am of little use to you, I shall go home. I really wish I knew Lord Mononobe's version of the game, though. Let me know if you find out any more."

"Don't hold your breath," Kobe snapped.

But two days later, Kobe sent him a message: "Student identified. Please attend questioning in my office."

Akitada raised his brows at the "please." Kobe must be desperate.

The ferret's name was Daisai Masahira. He was in his twenties, and Kobe's epithet fit him well. He was both sleek and slender. His sharp nose twitched, and his small black eyes flitted around the room as if he were looking for a hidden nest-egg. He had quickly weighed Akitada's rank and now ignored him.

Kobe seemed in low spirits. He was surprisingly courteous with Daisai because, he explained to Akitada, the student had come in of his own free will. Daisai's family lived in the Otokuni district west of the capital, and he had gone home for a brief visit and thus missed the news of the murder.

Daisai shook his head and murmured, "Terrible! I wish I had known about the poison. I could have warned the master."

"Never mind, son," Kobe said consolingly. "You did the right thing."

"Do I understand that you were one of Master Nakamura's students the morning he died?" Akitada asked.

"Yes. I was the first one. In fact, I was waiting for the master when he arrived."

Kobe cleared his throat pointedly.

"Sorry," said Akitada, meeting Kobe's eyes.

Kobe continued, "And you say you drank some of Nakamura's tea?"

"Ah!" Akitada bit his lip as soon as he had spoken.

"Yes. I took just a sip to be polite. I don't like tea." Daisai lowered his eyes modestly.

"And?"

"On my way back to the university I was quite sick and vomited."

Kobe turned to Akitada. "You see the problem?"

"I think so." Akitada was fascinated by Daisai's manner and asked the student, "Had you been taking lessons long?"

Daisai's eyes went around the room again. "Not really," he said vaguely. "A man in my position must make his way in the world. I decided to become proficient at *go*. In polite company one must be able to perform well at a number of skills. I also practice poetry and dancing."

Akitada murmured, "How commendable!"

"Well," said Kobe to Daisai. "I expect that's all. Thank you for coming in right away. You have been very helpful."

"Any time, captain." Daisai was up, bowing deeply to both of them and slipping out the door.

Kobe met Akitada's eyes and sighed. "What's the matter?" asked Akitada innocently.

"How can you ask such a foolish question? I have to start all over again because the poison was already in the tea when Daisai got there. That eliminates both Daisai and Mononobe. I swear I'll end up having to arrest that miserable maid after all."

"The maid?"

"Have you forgotten that she prepared the tea things? And I was right. She had a motive. The innkeeper's been trying to fire her. He says she's getting old and forgetful, and he wants more attractive maids. But she's a widow with five children to support and scared of Nakamura's complaints. I really hate a case like this."

"Hmm," Akitada said. "Daisai seems to be an ambitious young man who takes his future career most seriously."

Kobe growled, "Who cares. I've got a murder on my hands."

"Have you found out who Nakamura's heir is?"

"Yes. He had a nephew. Fellow called Tadano. Why?"

"I wondered if you planned to talk to the nephew."

Kobe hooted derisively. "Go all the way to Nagaoka? You must be out of your mind. What for? Nakamura was as poor as a temple sparrow. I've been to his hovel. A couple of old blankets, some tattered books, and empty cupboards in the kitchen. He had nothing of any value that anyone would kill for."

"Isn't Nagaoka in the district Daisai comes from?"

"Forget Daisai. The poor kid almost got killed himself."

"Well, it was just a thought," Akitada said, getting up. "Let me know if there are any more developments."

"Developments?" Kobe asked. "What developments? There's only that cursed fool of a maid."

"Oh," said Akitada vaguely, "you never know."

The following day Kobe arrested the maid for Nakamura's murder,

and Akitada decided it was time to make his move. He traveled to Nagaoka on horseback, accompanied by the cry of the geese flying south to their winter homes and the rustling of the wind in the dry reeds along the highway.

Nagaoka had once served temporarily as an imperial city, but its palaces had long since burned to the ground or been dismantled. Only two large temples still stood amidst the paddies and fields, watching over the small farms scattered about like mother hens over their chicks.

Akitada visited both temples, left an offering in each, and burnt some incense in memory of Master Nakamura. Then he went to the inn for his midday meal. It was no more than a dusty barn of a place. At an open hearth two women were stirring food or pouring wine for the handful of local farmers or travelers who had stopped in.

Akitada ordered and seated himself next to an old man who was carrying on a teasing conversation with the two women.

"From the capital?" the old man asked, glancing at Akitada's green silk hunting cloak and black hat.

"Yes, honorable grandfather," Akitada said politely. "Perhaps you can tell me how to find Nakamura's farm?"

"Nakamura?" Bright eyes studied him from under grizzled brows. "He's dead, I hear."

"Yes. I was a friend and came to visit his relatives."

"Only that good-for-nothing Yukihiro's left."

"Master Nakamura's nephew?"

The old man nodded and fell into a prolonged, thoughtful silence, ignoring all further attempts of Akitada to involve him in conversation. Akitada's food, served by the pretty young maid, was an excellent soup and very decent wine. On an impulse Akitada had another small pitcher of wine brought for the old man.

He poured, drank deeply, and announced, "Never did a day's work in his life. Drove his mother to an early grave. A bum."

"How does he support himself then?" Akitada asked, extending his empty bowl to the younger woman for a refill.

The old man turned his pitcher upside down to show it was empty. After a sidelong glance at Akitada he said, "Rents out his fields. Borrows. Gambles. Starves. Until now." He flicked the cup with a gnarled finger.

Akitada sighed and bought him another pitcher of wine. "What do you mean 'until now'?"

The old man drank and scowled. "Sold the land and went away a rich man. This morning."

"Ah. Do you know a Daisai Masahira?"

"It's a small town," nodded the man, emptying the last of his second pitcher into his cup.

Watching this maneuver, Akitada decided to speed up the conversation. "What sort of person is he? Perhaps he knows the Tadano family?"

"Everybody knows everybody here. A black-bellied squirrel, that Daisai." The old man spat with accuracy into the fire. "Him and Yuki used to come here to drink when Yuki had some money." He paused with his cup halfway to his lips. "Something wrong with the old master's death?" he asked suspiciously.

They locked eyes. Akitada, placing some money on the floor, said, "Forgive me for taking up your time with my idle chatter," and left.

Before returning to the capital Akitada decided to have a look at Nakamura's farm. He found it easily. A few tattered buildings huddled in a grove amidst poor and stony fields, but they were surrounded by many ancient trees and the view was magnificent. The site overlooked a lake and both temples. Only five miles to the northeast lay the capital with its towering mountains beyond it.

A crew of laborers were already clearing the site. When Akitada rode up to the main house, a short, fat man emerged, making squawking noises and waving his arms about like an angry goose.

Akitada stopped his horse and waited for the man, who wore the robe and hat of a minor official.

"No one is allowed here," scolded the official. "Orders of his imperial highness the crown prince."

Akitada raised his brows. "I see. I did not know that. You really should post warnings. I came to speak to the owner."

The man took in Akitada's clothes and his speech and bowed. "Please forgive my rudeness. We have not had time for signs. Tadano Yukihiro sold the property. In fact, he just left for the capital."

Akitada nodded and turned his horse homeward.

As soon as he reached the capital, and without bothering to change his travel-stained clothing, he went to look for Daisai at the university. The student was not in any of his classes, but one of his professors told him that a farmer from Daisai's hometown had come for him. "Daisai looked very upset when he saw the man," he volunteered. "I do hope there is no trouble."

"When was this?" asked Akitada, his heart beating faster.

The professor peered dubiously at the sun. "It cannot have been very long. I had just finished my class."

"Do you have any idea where I might find them?"

The professor scratched his thinning grey hair. "You might try the Pear Tree Inn outside the university gate. Most of the young people like to go there."

The Pear Tree Inn was actually a small restaurant selling cheap wine and food. It was well attended by students and locals. Akitada found Daisai seated in a corner with a stocky middle-aged man in

coarse, countrified clothing. Daisai's back was toward the entrance, and Akitada walked up to them without being noticed. With a big smile and a slap on Daisai's back, he seated himself between them.

Daisai turned chalk white and attempted to rise. Akitada pulled him back down, putting his arm around his shoulder. "Well met, young man," he said jovially. "What are you drinking?"

Daisai gulped. "Ah, nothing. Thank you. We were just leaving, sir."

"Come! Keep me company!" Akitada urged. "I've just returned from a trip, and my throat is dry with the dust of the road. Your friend, too. I did not catch his name."

Daisai's companion returned Akitada's smile, revealing several gaps in his teeth. He announced proudly, "Tadano Yukihiro at your service, sir."

Daisai squirmed, and Akitada put a restraining hand on his arm. "What enormous luck!" he cried. "I have just returned from a trip to Nagaoka to see you. If I had known, I could have saved myself a long, dusty ride. You really should expect visitors now that you have come into your inheritance."

The small eyes in the farmer's broad face gleamed with pleasure. He clapped his hands in childish joy. "Good! You come from Lord Mononobe?"

Daisai hissed, "Do not waste the gentleman's time with your problems!"

But the master's nephew was too intent on Akitada's purpose to take notice. "Did you bring the gold?" he asked. "We were about to pay a visit to the crown prince. It's been taking too long, and I don't mind telling you, the little bit on account Lord Mononobe sent is long gone."

Akitada shook his head with a smile. "I regret that gold is too heavy to carry about, but I can take you where you will get what you deserve. Perhaps you will both be so kind as to accompany me there?"

Daisai made another desperate effort to warn Tadano. "It's all a mistake!" he cried. "This person is with the ministry of justice. He knows nothing about your money."

Yukihiro looked uncertainly at Akitada. "Ministry of justice?" he repeated stupidly.

"There is no mistake!" said Akitada, suddenly stern. "Let's go! Daisai, we are going to see Kobe. It is in your best interest to cooperate."

Daisai flinched. Then he said, "Of course. I meant to speak to the captain sooner or later. I did not discover until today that Yukihiro has been plotting with Mononobe. That was very clever of you, sir, the way you got him to admit it."

"What are you talking about?" Yukihiro asked, looking from Daisai to Akitada. "What's going on?"

"Let's go, Yuki," said Daisai, pulling his erstwhile friend up. "The gentleman is quite right."

The way to the municipal police station took them past the popular park called the Divine Spring Garden. It looked no less divine in autumn with its mix of reds, oranges, and golden yellows in the foliage of its trees, but the street was deserted. Akitada walked between the two men to prevent them from talking to each other.

Daisai appeared completely cooperative, and Akitada was beginning to wonder if the student could seriously expect to weasel out of this situation, when they passed into the shadow of a grove of crimson maples. Suddenly he felt a sharp, painful blow to the back of one of his knees. It buckled and pitched him forward on the ground. Before he could gather his wits, Daisai's foot shot out to deliver a killing kick to his temple. Akitada managed to twist aside at the last moment and deflected the impact to his jaw and shoulder. His ears were still ringing and his eyes watering with the pain of the attack when he felt the impact of a body crushing him into the gravel. Daisai had flung himself on his back, and his wiry fingers were reaching for his throat. Akitada responded by tucking in his jaw.

"Bring a rock and hit him on the head!" Daisai shouted frantically above him.

There was no point in waiting for the reinforcements. Akitada was bigger and stronger than his attacker and in good physical condition. With a mighty heave upward, he unseated the student and struck his jaw with his fist. Daisai went limp.

Akitada stood up, testing his bruised leg gingerly and cursing himself for a fool. Since Daisai had always cultivated a civilized behavior, he had kept his eye on the sullen Yukihiro. But Daisai's self-improvement program had evidently included some very low street-fighting tricks.

Feeling his tender jaw Akitada looked around for Yukihiro. The fellow still stood in the middle of the street, a puzzled look on his broad face. Whether Nakamura's nephew was simply slow or had a little of his uncle's goodness in his veins after all, he had not joined in the attack on him.

Akitada brushed the dirt and leaves off his gown. "Pick Daisai up and put him over your shoulder," he said to Yukihiro. "You look strong enough."

The other man looked up and down the street, then approached slowly. "What are you going to do?"

"Take him to police headquarters. He has some explaining to do, and so do you. Pick him up and follow me."

"He kicked you. I have done nothing."

"Then you have nothing to fear."

After a moment Yukihiro bent, lifted the limp form of his friend, flung him over his shoulder like a bag of rice, and trotted after Akitada.

In this manner they passed through the gate and courtyard of the police station, stared at by constables and gathering a small retinue of the red-coated guardians of the peace who followed them into Kobe's office. Kobe was seated behind a broad desk reading some document. He got up slowly and stared. "What happened to Daisai?" he asked.

"He tried to kill me because I was about to turn him and his partner here in for Nakamura's murder." Yukihiro made some confused protest but fell quiet when the constables drew nearer. Akitada motioned for him to put down his burden and sit, then sat down himself. "This is Tadano Yukihiro, the master's nephew," he said to Kobe.

Kobe's eyes lit up. "You don't say. How very convenient! When I was checking into that inheritance, I turned up a very interesting surprise." Kobe looked at Yukihiro with great satisfaction. "We sent for you, but you weren't on your uncle's farm."

"It was mine," Yukihiro cried, "and I haven't done anything."

"Quiet!" Kobe roared. He got up and walked around his desk till he could lean over Nakamura's nephew. "So you're the master's heir, are you? And when you heard the prince wished to build a temple, you knew you were about to strike it rich."

Yukihiro shrank back. "It's all legal," he protested. "I signed the papers weeks ago."

"Did you indeed?" Kobe straightened up, grinning broadly. Turning to Akitada, he asked, "How did you guess?"

"There had to be something that would make the master's death profitable. You may remember I suggested finding his heir. When you arrested that maid, I decided to do it myself."

Kobe flushed. "I let the poor thing go. She kept crying for her kids." Glancing at the unconscious Daisai, he asked, "What's he got to do with it?"

"I believe that Yukihiro was approached by his friend Daisai with interesting news about his uncle's farm. But perhaps you had better let him tell his story."

Seeing their eyes on him, Yukihiro stammered, "You think I killed Uncle?"

Kobe said, "We think your friend Daisai killed him because you promised him and Lord Mononobe a share in the profits from the farm. That makes you guilty also."

Yukihiro shook his head as if to clear it. "Daisai did it?" he asked. Suddenly tears started to roll down his face. "Not Daisai," he sobbed. "He wouldn't. Daisai knew I wouldn't want Uncle to get hurt."

"You'd better tell us about it," said Kobe.

The story, haltingly told by a confused Yukihiro, was a simple one. On one of his visits home Daisai had informed him that the poor land he was cursing was worth a great deal of gold in the capital. He had

offered to arrange a sale after Master Nakamura's death in return for a share for himself and a court official. Yukihiro, penniless and hounded by creditors, agreed eagerly and signed papers. Then, by a miracle, it had all come true. His uncle had died, he had sold the farm, and the money would be his as soon as this Lord Mononobe paid. Kobe listened with open-mouthed enjoyment.

"You don't say," he remarked when Yukihiro was done. "How very nice!" He told the constables to take both Daisai and Yukihiro away and lock them up for the time being. "So you were right," he said when they were alone. "Mononobe was in this, too."

Akitada nodded. "He had to be. Mononobe knew of the crown prince's dream and his plan to construct a fabulous temple in Nagao-ka. He will not, I think, readily confess his complicity, but Daisai will talk. His only hope is to show that he was manipulated by Mononobe. The nephew, I think, truly was an unwitting tool in their hands."

"Yes. He's too stupid." Kobe slapped his hands on his knees and cried, "We'll celebrate. You'll take a cup of wine with me?" Akitada nodded. Pouring the wine and overflowing with good will and generosity towards Akitada, Kobe remarked, "I must say it is amazing that you deduced all of this from the arrangement of a few stones on a go board."

Akitada accepted the peace offering. "The particular contest they engaged in is called a 'race.' It is much quicker than the ordinary game because it is won by whoever makes the first capture. It is possible that the master proposed the abbreviated game as Mononobe claims. It does not really matter. What is peculiar is that a superior player like Mononobe would lose so badly."

"But how did you know that?"

"Did you make a diagram of the game on the board?"

Kobe flushed. "No."

"Well, let me see." Akitada reached across the desk for a sheet of paper and the captain's brush. Dipping the brush into the ink, he sketched the position of the nineteen black and white stones. "I believe that is the way it was. We know Nakamura played black. He won because black surrounded and thus captured two white stones."

Kobe stared at the paper and shook his head. "I don't understand his mistake."

"Nakamura, playing black, started. They each played nine stones. The final turn was Nakamura's, and he completed the capture. But it took two turns to surround the stones, and Mononobe had a chance to block. He did not block. A child could have played better."

Kobe nodded. "Yes, I see it now. But it's such a little thing to hang a murder on. Maybe Mononobe had a bad day."

Akitada looked at him. "No. I have thought much about this match. There seems to me only one reason why Mononobe lost: he deliber-

ately ended the game. Given his many attempts to take Nakamura's title, he must have had a powerful reason to end the game so abruptly by losing: Mononobe knew that Nakamura would die after drinking his tea."

Kobe cried, "But that means Mononobe poisoned the tea. What about Daisai? Why did he make up a tale about getting sick from Nakamura's tea when there was no poison in the tea yet?"

"Daisai was his accomplice. It was he who poisoned the tea. Think about it! The murder involved a certain amount of risk, which Mononobe and Daisai shared equally for mutual protection. Daisai put the poison in the tea, and Mononobe visited Nakamura to make sure the master drank it. When you accused Mononobe, Daisai came forward with his story. Yukihiro was carefully kept out of it because he represented the missing motive and was clearly not very intelligent."

Kobe thought. "It may be hard to prove."

"Remember one of Nakamura's rules," said Akitada. "'Always use your opponent's weakness.' Yukihiro, with his naivete the weakest link, has already broken the case. Of the remaining two, Daisai is the weaker personality. People like him always save their own skin at the cost of others. He is unlikely to suffer the penalty while Mononobe goes free, reaping the profits from his crime." He paused and smiled sadly. "I have learned much by playing *go* with the master."

Kobe nodded. Raising his cup to Akitada, he said, "I wish I had known the old man. He must have been something."

Outside the latticed window a bird began to sing.

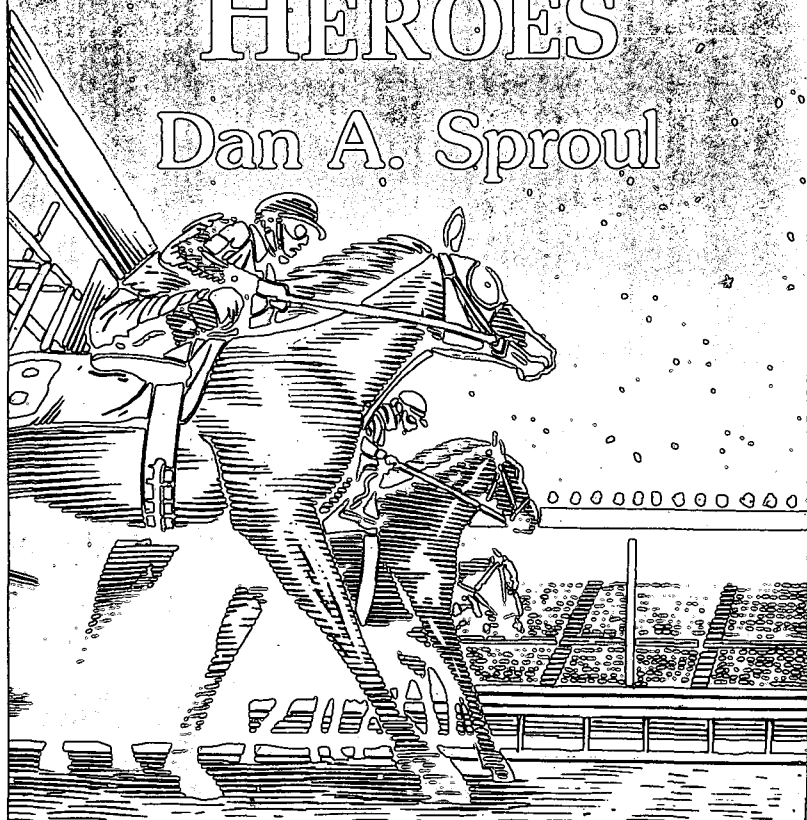
Akitada's eyes moistened. After a moment he said, his voice catching a little, "When I was on my way to see the master, I heard a cuckoo singing in a willow. I should have suspected then. The cuckoo is called the guide of the soul across the hills of death. No doubt it was taking Master Nakamura to paradise, where he is even now teaching the immortals how to play the game."

The song stopped, and with a flutter of wings, the bird was gone.

After a moment Kobe cleared his throat. "I wonder," he asked, "if you would honor me with a small lesson."

ALL ABOUT HEROES

Dan A. Sproull



If you're a private detective in Miami, you'll be cynical. If you're a private detective in Miami who is approaching middle age, you'll be unreasonably cynical. If you also happen to play the horses, I can attest to the fact that you will become clinically paranoid and can count on a cursory distrust of all things moving

or stationary—particularly anything human or, as is sometimes the case in my part of Miami, anything nearly human. This view of the world could explain why I had only three heroes.

It's natural to have heroes in adolescence but not so easy when you turn forty. Celluloid celebrities, jock stars, singing personal-

ities, politicians—all the heroes of the decade—they don't show me much.

I'm Joe Standard, Standard Investigations. Like I said, I only had three heroes.

Winston Churchill, by dint of will alone, and virtually single-handed, saved Western civilization from countless decades of anarchy and untold agony.

Seattle Slew, graced with the speed of Dr. Fager and the stamina of Forego, was in my estimation the best two-, three-, and four-year-old colt that ever raced. On my office wall above my cot is a grandiose blown-up photo depicting the Slew's majestic countenance as he destroyed the finest three-year-olds of 1977 in his effortless romp in the Preakness Stakes.

And then there's Willie March. Willie March was an old geezer. He'd go maybe five foot three on tippy toes. Willie was a jockey back in the fifties until he got mixed up with the mob in some kind of race-fixing scam. The stewards permanently banned him from riding.

Willie hired me about ten years back to find his wife. She had run off with a bartender. I found the pair in a trailer park up in Tallahassee living in sin. I testified. Willie got an uncontested divorce and went quietly back to his ten acre farm in Davie. I'd have forgotten all about him except for one thing: horsetrack legend had it that Willie March was one of the three best horseplayers who ever lived.

I know what you're thinking, and it's true—most jockeys are abysmal boneheads when it comes to handicapping horses. But Willie was the proverbial exception proving the rule. The rumor was, he took thirty grand a year—no more, no less—to supplement his Social Security. Another thing you ought to know about Willie: he liked cats.

An incredible three week losing streak at Hialeah had me scrounging around in my desk drawers for loose change. Unannounced, Willie came back into my life through the open office door, carrying a shoebox under each arm.

"Your phone don't work," said Willie.

Of course I knew that. The phone bill is the first casualty after going winless for three weeks. Since I'd been struggling for a horse to bail me out, I greeted Willie with a bit more enthusiasm than a mud Marine on V-J Day. After all, here was a man whose ability at picking horses was legend. With a small bankroll and an overlay from Willie, I could recoup all my losses in short order.

"Long time no see," I began, probing for a way to pry a winner out of him. "It must be ten years ..."

"I ain't got time for chitchat," Willie said. He placed the shoeboxes gently on the desk. "I need to hire you again."

"You know I'm always glad to help you out when I can, Willie. And maybe you can help me out.

I haven't had a horse on the board in three weeks. If you could . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, maybe later," said Willie impatiently. "I've got a problem, and I need your help."

"What's the problem? You get married again?"

"Nuthin' like that. Take a look." He nodded at the shoeboxes.

I slid one of the boxes over to my side of the desk and flipped the lid off. There was a cat inside—a kitten really. Twisted tight around its neck, embedded deeply in the bloodsoaked fur, was a thin length of wire. The kitten was very dead.

"Whoa God! . . . What kind of a sicko did this?"

Willie's bony features scrunched into a pained look at the sight of the kitten. "That's what I want you to find out. I offered money—five thousand . . ." His voice broke. He replaced the lid on the box and placed it alongside the other box reverently. "The kitten's mother is in the other box," he said. "I'll give you the five thousand if you find the killers."

"Killers, you say. You think there's more than one?"

"They call on the phone—two different voices so far."

"Two . . . are you sure there were two?"

Willie nodded. "Yeah. One guy had a kind of accent."

"What kind of accent? Spanish? French? Chinese?"

"Hell, I don't know what language—it wasn't Spanish—maybe German. He just pronounced his words funny. But I understood him okay."

I decided to let it go. It didn't mean much. English was a second language for almost everybody in Miami.

"Maybe you'd better tell me about it."

"Three days ago it started," Willie began. "I came home and they were gone, all except Kelso. He was up in a tree in the back yard." Willie regarded my blank look and started again. "All my cats: I had twelve of 'em. I keep them on the screened-in patio when I'm not home. Somebody stole them, all but Kelso. He's an ornery bastard—don't like anybody. He probably got away. Anyhow, I couldn't figure where they had got to. Then I get this phone call. Some guy says he's got all my cats. I figure it's a shake-down, but he tells me he don't want no money. All he wants from me is a winning horse, one every day. If the horse I give him wins, I get a cat back."

"And if the horse you give him loses?"

"I gave 'em two losers already," said Willie. "I found the kitten on my doorstep after the first horse lost. The next day, after the second horse lost, the guy with the accent called and told me to look on my back fence. I found the mother cat hangin' out there."

"So you put the dead cats in the shoeboxes?" Willie nodded. "Why do you suppose they don't just take the five thousand you offered?"

"The guy told me why," Willie explained. "If they asked me for money, it would be extortion, a

hard-time rap. But there's only a twenty dollar fine for killing somebody's pet. So even if they get caught, the cops can't do nothin' to 'em."

"I think it's extortion anyway," I told him. "Did you go to the cops?"

"Yeah, I called 'em. They said they'd send extra cars through the neighborhood and be on the lookout. Big deal. Cops couldn't find the sun at noon in the middle of July. I want my cats back. I'm willing to give you five grand if you find out who's doin' this and help me get 'em back. Hell, I'll make it ten thousand. And there ain't much time."

"Why is that?"

"I gave them the third horse this morning," Willie explained.

"Why don't you give them winners, Willie? Maybe you can get the cats back alive."

"I forgot to tell you that part," Willie said. "They don't want just any winner. The horse has to pay at least five to one. That ain't so easy."

"And you already gave them the third horse?"

Willie nodded. "Yeah, Tough Touey in the fifth, today at Hialeah."

Tough Touey was big for a two-year-old: maybe seventeen hands. Most big colts that age are clumsy. Tough Touey was clumsy. I watched him stumble over his own feet breaking off from the post parade to begin his warmup. Through binoculars I followed him into the backstretch as he unlimbered. He didn't fall down, a good sign.

To say I was overwrought concerning the prospects of Tough Touey in the upcoming race is a fair statement but an understatement. My brain was boiling in search of any snippet of information missed, any nuance of form overlooked, any variable not taken into account in the desperate decision to dump Willie's two hundred dollar retainer on Tough Touey's nose.

The heat from my eyeballs steamed the binocular lenses. It was a testament to my anxiety. Then too, it seemed hot for March—maybe ninety. Hialeah was but a shadow of her glory days, so it probably wasn't heat radiating from the handful of people here and there in the stands. It had to be the lack of breeze. The sailboat in the infield lake appeared fastened in light blue epoxy. The famous pink flamingos, like the limp infield flags, stood unmoving. They could have been Bal Harbor lawn ornaments.

Swine was with me. Swine is short for Swinehart. He had the trots. "I got to go again, Joe," he said. He wouldn't admit it, but I knew it was the hundred dollar syndrome. Swine was a devout holes-in-the-soles horseplayer. Unfortunately, he was a patsy for the play, stringing his money out—ten, twenty, thirty a race—every race. Dumping fifty or more on one horse to win did something strange to his bowels. Swine had put his last eighty bucks on Tough Touey. Like myself, he was not about to ignore a tip from Willie March.

Even though Tough Touey was still a maiden (a nonwinner, to you uninitiated), he had speed of a sort. Touey was holding at nine to one on the tote. He looked okay to me. Besides, Willie was willing to bet a cat. I was convinced that one plunge with Willie's two hundred and I could recover from the drubbing handed me over the past three weeks. In turn, I had convinced Swine.

"I got to go now," said Swine more emphatically, handing me his earphones and tiny shirt-pocket radio. And down the aisle he went, three steps at a clip.

I brought one earphone up for a listen. A jarring, discordant bleating blasted in my ear, reminiscent of a man wrapped in barbed wire screaming in anguish as he rolls down off a tin roof into a stack of several thousand pressure cooker lids. The racket ended abruptly. "Yeah, gang, that was Spoiled Spam doing their latest platinum release, 'In Your Ear with a Pigmy Spear.' And now . . ."

The horrifying thought that some addlebrained adolescent listening to this drivel might one day aspire to the Presidency made my body quiver. I squirreled my little finger around inside my ear to see if the ringing would stop.

At one minute to post, an out-rider began to lead the band of two-year-olds toward the gate setup at the five-eighths pole. As big as he was, Touey would need a couple of furlongs to get his legs moving.

Five furlongs, five eighths of a

mile, isn't a far distance for a mature racehorse, but it's a good hike for developing two-year-olds. Speed is very nearly all in such a race. But speed is a deceptive thing. There are only two ways for a horse to win a race. Either he leads at some point and goes all the way, or he catches whoever is leading before the leader finds the finish line. Two-year-olds are notoriously short on stamina, particularly if several of the contenders have matched early speed. They tend to cook each other on the front end.

Touey was a big, rangy bay. It would take him a half mile to get up steam. The race contained three certifiable speedballs; they would be smoking out of the gate, vying for the lead, eyeball-to-eyeball for the first half mile. Whichever of the three survived the pace figured to be stepping on his tongue after four furlongs. The last furlong belonged to Touey—he owned it.

Anyway, that's the way it figured on paper to those who understand the dynamics of two-year-old-maiden racing. Of course that was not exactly the way it happened.

It was a short field. Only nine would go. Swine came rushing up the aisle still buckling his trousers as the starter set them loose. About five tons of swerving, bumping, digging, driving, excitable baby horseflesh went pounding all out for position down the backstretch.

As I had suspected, the three known speedballs began to draw

off from the less fleet of the bunch. A muscular little roan followed along in fourth position, and behind him—Tough Touey.

After a quarter mile, the three leaders were reduced to two. The little roan advanced steadily, running third, and behind him—Tough Touey. I dropped the binoculars for an instant to wipe the steam away. "Who the hell's that roan out there—the four horse?" I asked Swine.

"Uncle's John . . ." Swine responded, studying the program. Then he added, "He's a first-time starter."

I slammed the binoculars back in place. Into the stretch turn they came, the roan lapped on the leader, and behind him—Tough Touey. Wide into the stretch the tiring front runner flattened out, giving ground to the roan. Uncle's John began to open up serious daylight. At the sixteenth pole the roan led by two, and gaining ground behind him—Tough Touey.

Giggling all the way, Uncle's John hit the wire in front by four, and behind him . . .

"*Touey, you donkey!*" I pulled the sweat-encrusted pari-mutuel tickets from my shirt pocket, praying that by some miracle the seller had punched out the wrong number and mistakenly given me a winner. The fitting refrain "In your ear with a pigmy spear" coursed through my feverish brain. That great loping goat Tough Touey had extended my streak to twenty-four consecutive losers—an unprecedented

record. And Willie could count on another dead cat. I stood up and ripped the tickets crossways and lengthways with deliberation, casting the evil things from my person. I watched the pieces flutter down onto the trashstrewn floor. "That's it. No more. I'm done. I quit. I don't even want to see another goddamn horse."

"Sure. *Now* you quit," said Swine, his overactive-thyroid-ravaged, bug-eyed, bucktoothed body twitching. "After you stiff me out of my last eighty bucks—you unspeakable filth." Clamping his earphones in place, he twisted the volume knob higher and stomped off down the concrete steps.

It is the habit of the horseplayer to count himself blameless in losing situations. Culpability generally rests with stupid and/or crooked jockeys, trainers, and owners, or in this case perhaps one of the top five hundred horseplayers in Florida.

Without a bankroll it was pointless to stay and watch the lumbering five thousand dollar claimers in the upcoming sixth race. I decided to take a stroll up to the reserved boxes and find out why my good friend Willie, allegedly a horseplayer and owner of three dead cats, wished to see me a homeless derelict in search of a meal.

I found Willie with a couple of his cronies on the second level. His features were a roadmap of anguish. "Did you find out anything?" he asked, with a display of lackluster hope.

It would have been awkward to reveal to him that I found he probably wasn't one of the top three horseplayers in the world. So I lied.

"Nothing yet. But I've got an idea. Get caller I.D. on your phone, then we can . . ."

Willie shook his head. "That ain't gonna work. I got that on my phone—I called the number back. Some drunk answered. It was a pay phone in the north end, first level grandstand."

"Hmm," I said thoughtfully. Willie waited expectantly for more while I eyeballed his companions. He noted my reluctance to speak.

"It's okay," he reassured me. "I know these guys for twenty years. You can talk in front of them."

Willie made the introductions. The little old bald guy with *Racing Form* in lap nodded hello—typical lifelong horseplayer; two-day-old beard, limited teeth, trying to get nine days out of the same pair of pants. His name was Oscar something or other. The other guy was a few years younger, maybe five years away from Social Security and the mobile home shuffleboard courts. He dressed a bit better, and his shoes were only beginning to come away from the soles—just a casual player no doubt. His name I got: Gus Romero. He was a friend from New Jersey, according to Willie. Gus spoke in pure Brooklynese and announced his presence up front with a purplish, pitted, baked potato nose.

"So you're the private dick," the nose said as greeting, in lieu

of a handshake. I could but shrug an acknowledgment.

"I'm gonna bet," Willie announced. "You want anything in the sixth, Oscar?"

"Get me the four—ten and ten." Oscar the bald said, forking over a twenty. It was then I noticed that Oscar's right leg was done up in some kind of leg brace.

"Back in a minute, Joe," Willie the wannabe handicapper advised me as he and Potato Nose made the steep climb up to the sellers on the third level to send it in on the sixth.

I turned my attention to Oscar. "So you and Willie go back twenty years?"

"Yeah, at least that. I met Willie when he first started betting the Florida tracks. Let's see—about '73 or '74—about the time Calder opened up."

"You know, the word is that Willie is one of the top three handicappers in the world . . . you ever hear that?" I asked.

Oscar made a strange noise akin to a giggle. "Hear it, hell, me and Travis started that story fifteen years ago. Told everybody that Willie was third in the world handicapping championship in Vegas, second at Penn National, all that sort of stuff. Kept it going for almost two years."

"Travis?"

"Travis used to bet with us. He died some years back in a fire. Willie figured the propaganda we put out would be a good joke to play on all these bums we run into. Willie got a big charge out of touting horses. Most of the time

we give the guy looking for a tip the stiffaroony, and we all had a big laugh."

I was awestruck. "Are you telling me Willie ain't a top handicapper? Don't he win no races?"

"He's as good as the next guy—some days he wins, some days he don't. He don't do enough homework to be a world champion. You didn't buy all that world champion malarkey, did you?"

"Me, believe that? What do you take me for?" A silence ensued. This was an awkward turn of events. I struggled with the dilemma. "He comes to the track every day, don't he?" I asked finally.

"He's here 'most every day, except once every few months he goes to visit his sister in New Jersey. She's got TB or something. He claims she raised him when their parents got killed in a car accident when he was just a kid."

I spotted Potato Nose and Willie making their way back down toward us. I still needed the answer to the big question. So I put it to Oscar: "Tell me, Oscar, you think Willie makes a good living at the track?"

Oscar chuckled. "If he makes a good living, he don't make it at the track. We keep a tally—Willie's up just over three thousand this year." Then he added smugly, "Hell, I got him beat by nine hundred."

"Hey, Willie!" Oscar yelled up the aisle as Willie and Gus came down to their seats. "Your detective buddy here believed the championship story."

"That's a damn lie!" I said, louder than necessary. "I never said I believed it."

Willie looked annoyed. He handed over Oscar's ticket while everybody got a good chuckle at my expense. I then pointed out to them that whatever I believed was academic—somebody sure as hell believed Willie was a top handicapper. I started to explain about the abduction of Willie's cats, but Willie cut me off. He pointed out that the boys already knew about the cats. It was now obvious that I could rule out the two saps—Oscar the bald and potato nose Gus—since they were aware of Willie's shameful inability to pick a winner even if his cat's life depended on it.

"So what do we do next?" Willie put to me. "They're gonna be callin' tonight or tomorrow morning for another winnin' horse."

"Two things come to mind," I told him. One of the things was to find a real handicapper to pick a horse, but I felt it ill advised to mention that. "First we need somebody to stake out the Hialeah grandstand phones. And I'll try to stake out your place tonight—see if I can't catch somebody dropping off a cat."

Arrangements were made for Gus to keep an eye on the north end grandstand phones and Oscar to watch the south end first level phones the next morning. I got another two hundred from Willie and enticed Swine, with prepayment of a fifty, to help me stake out Willie's place in Davie that night.

Willie's ten acres in Davie were in a secluded area at the end of a short stone road. The nearest and only other farm was at the entrance end of the road on the opposite side, maybe four hundred yards away.

It was getting dark when I pulled into Willie's driveway. Lightning off in the west threatened a wet night. I'd been having trouble getting the top up on my '65 Mustang, so I worked the top switch while Swine grabbed and pulled. Just as I locked the top down, the rain came.

Willie let us in through the garage and took us on a tour through a luxuriously furnished living area with high arched ceilings and a massive marble fireplace. Large sliding glass doors led out to a kind of screened-in patio/porch. Two yellowish eyes glared from a dim corner of the patio. It was the lone surviving, ornery Kelso. Beyond the patio lay an unlighted open pool area. Willie divulged that the catnappers had yet to contact him for the next day's winning horse; whereupon he went back to wait by the phone.

Most of Willie's property was in woods, which in Florida is more accurately described as jungle. Spattered here and there among the thick brush were some pine trees and a few cabbage palms. There wasn't much of a back yard cleared; the wild growth reached right through the four foot high chain-link fence that enclosed the swimming pool.

The heavy rain subsided to a slow, persistent drizzle.

"Okay, Swine. Find a spot back here out of sight."

"Why the hell can't I stay on the screened patio, where it's dry?"

"It's blacker than a coal miner's lungs out here," I explained impatiently. "You can't see nothin' though that screen." I pointed to a corner where the fence was fastened to the house. "Get over there behind the pool's pump housing and keep your eyes open. And get that stupid radio out of your ear." I handed him a flashlight. "You hear anything out there in the shrubbery, put this light on it."

"Where you gonna be?"

"I'll be out in the car watching the front."

"Yeah, right," said Swine sourly, packing his earphones into a pocket.

Rather than go back inside, I went out a small gate in the fence and slogged around the house to the Mustang. It looked like it might be a long night.

I slouched down in the Mustang's front seat to ponder some puzzling questions. Willie wasn't clearing enough money at the track to feed his cats, but unlike his fellow senior citizens, he sure as hell wasn't eating catfood himself. The taxes on his ranch had to eat up a big chunk of the six or seven grand he got annually from Social Security. And it is widely realized by even the lowliest punter at the track that a rather substantial bankroll is required to win over a long period without tapping out from time to time. So where was he getting his cash? Most important of all: could he

cough up the ten grand fee he'd promised? Beyond all that, something else nagged at my memory—something Oscar had said. I made a mental note to see if I could find the file on that old divorce job I did for Willie. Then there was the problem of the wire. I took the plastic Baggie with the piece of wire used to strangle the cat from my pocket. It didn't look galvanized like fence wire; it looked more like baling wire. I knew just the guy who could enlighten me about this piece of evidence.

A yell cut loose in the night stillness, breaking my concentration. I looked up to see a zigzag of light slicing the treetops at the back of the property, then darkness again. In the total dark I fumbled my way around the house and began to make feeble gestures toward where I thought the gate might be.

"Swine! Swine! Are you there? Turn on the flashlight. I can't see a damn thing."

"*Filthy snot scum!*" Swine shouted back.

At that point an outside light illuminated the pool area, and Willie came flying through the screen door. Swine stood at the back fence, mumbling, peering into the underbrush. A yellow and white tiger cat floated at the shallow end of the pool. Something black lying on the steps in the water below looked a lot like Swine's radio and earphones.

"It's Genuine Risk," Willie said. "The bastards . . . They killed Genuine Risk."

Willie was shaken. He waded into the pool. Hands trembling, he put the cat tenderly on the tile of the pool apron. "I want to know who did this," he directed at me. His intense anger made his whole body shake. "I'm not gonna let them get away with it."

I turned to Swine. "What happened back here?"

Swine pointed to his pocket radio, now at the bottom of the pool. "That's what happened. That's my radio down there." He could see right off that nobody was going to be satisfied or impressed with that report, so he continued. "I thought I heard something. I had one earphone on, so I took the radio off and started for the fence. The bastard threw the cat over the fence and hit me in the face. I dropped the radio in the pool."

"Yeah, okay, but did you get a look at him?" I prompted.

"Oh yeah, I saw the toad-faced bastard all right. Shone the light right in his fat toad kisser. Surprised the crap out of him."

"So what happened?"

"He gave me the finger," said Swine. "You believe that . . . he tosses me a bird. And he's the damn cat killer." He turned at this point to shout a few epithets at the bushes.

"So what did you do?"

"I threw the goddamn flashlight at him."

Willie didn't get a call that night. But at ten thirty the next morning, just after the track opened, the catnappers called for another winner. They said they

were fed up, according to Willie. This time, if the horse didn't win, three cats would die. I made a cellular call to Oscar and then Potato Nose during the catnapper call; nobody was using the public phones at Hialeah. Willie was trying to play it safe on a five to two shot. He gave them a rugged five-year-old gelding in the seventh by the name of Countmein. The seventh race wouldn't go off until around four o'clock; I had a little time.

I took Willie's cell phone with me and called an old associate, Lew Demarco. Lew ran a small security agency in upstate New York. I offered him two hundred to check out Willie and Gus Romero. I was pretty sure Willie wasn't telling me the whole truth, and I was curious to find out where his bankroll came from. I knew Lew had one guy who worked out of Atlantic City.

In the meantime I made a trip to see Sid the bookmaker. Back in the old days, before off-track betting, Sid used to take horse bets in the back room of his feedstore for the mob. He ran the best and biggest horse parlor in Dade County for a lot of years. Now he's small-time, strictly football cards and basketball.

Sid's feedstore is in Dania, a few miles up the interstate from Miami. I hadn't seen him in person for quite a while, although I'd used his collection man, Ironbelly, for cheap muscle on a few capers. I called ahead so he'd know I was coming.

"Joe . . . Jesus, you're gettin'

old," Sid greeted me. This coming from a guy with seventy percent of his gut plopped over the front of his belt and bags the size of horse turds under his eyes. "How long has it been? Eight, nine years now?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I said, restraining the urge to point out how close to a natural death *he* probably was. It was pretty clear he hadn't picked up anything heavier than a pinochle deck in a lot of years. "What can you tell me about this?" I ask him, holding out the short piece of wire.

He barely glanced at it. "What do you want to know?"

"I know it's probably baling wire—I just wondered if you could tell me if there's anything special about it."

"It's not baling wire," he replied without hesitation or elaboration.

I waited the customary five seconds, knowing full well Sid was the nosy type and prone to sniff out a dollar. Finally I asked, "So what the hell kind of wire is it?"

"Where did you get it?"

I explained about Willie's cats and the catnappers.

"Willie March . . . Willie March . . . the ex-jockey?"

"Yeah, Willie March. What about the wire?"

"Jesus! Those guys must be nuts. Don't they know who Willie is?"

"They think he's the third best horse handicapper in the world," I said.

"He ain't no handicapper," Sid came back.

"That I can vouch for. How 'bout the wire?"

"Then—you're working for Willie?"

"Yes, Sid. I am working for Willie. What the hell have we been talking about?"

Sid held out his hand. "Let me see it." He turned it once between thumb and forefinger. "Baling wire is a heavier gauge than this, and made of steel. This wire is aluminum—cheap, thin gauge. It's electric-fence wire, probably came from a two hundred fifty yard roll. Used for a small corral would be my guess." He looked up. "Say hello to Willie for me. And be sure to tell him I helped out. You'll tell him, right?"

"Yeah, sure, I'll tell him. You say hello to Ironbelly for me."

"I don't see Ironbelly much any more," Sid told me. "He's workin' for Delumbardo in the car repo business. I only use him once in a while."

I keep my old files in a two drawer filing cabinet that sits on a corner of my desk. It didn't take long to find the small file on the Willie March divorce. Travis is kind of an unusual name. At the track, when Oscar had mentioned that he and a guy named Travis had started the championship-handicapping crap about Willie, I knew I'd heard the name before in connection with Willie. And there it was in the file. The name of the bartender who ran off with Willie's wife was named Travis, Travis Macek.

Oscar said Travis had died in a

fire. I stopped by the Dade County library to check out the Tallahassee newspapers ten years back to see if I could find any reference to the death. It was surprisingly easy. Travis died about a month after the divorce. The article stated that Travis Macek and Joan March Macek died in a trailer fire. It was ruled accidental death. The arson inspectors reported that an electrical short caused leaking propane tanks on the house trailer to explode. According to the article, it happened in the dead of night, the fire spreading so rapidly that Travis and Willie's ex-wife had no chance to escape.

I had a good idea where the villains might be found. Let's face it, the two dufuses who figured out this cat-snatching scheme were not going to be building fusion-powered rockets any time soon. That is to say, they appeared to have taken it in the shorts in the brain department. I remembered that on the trip out to Willie's we'd passed a small house on the road that ran along the back side of Willie's woods. On the property was a small corral with a couple of horses. Holding those horses was an electric fence fastened to insulated metal posts, some planted at crazy angles to the ground. Every two feet on the fence strips of bright cloth flapping in the breeze proclaimed: HERE IS AN ELECTRIC FENCE IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE LOOKING FOR ONE WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE OF WILLIE MARCH'S RANCH. It stood out as one of the few eye-

sores blemishing the otherwise rather picturesque surroundings—hardly forgettable.

The morning had passed quickly. Post time for the seventh race was at four P.M. I had about four hours to save Willie's cat because the way I figured it Willie's horse Countmein didn't have a taxpayer's chance in the seventh—not if Willie was touting him. The man was a living anchor.

Swine rented an efficiency apartment in Miami Shores, which was really an oxymoron because it was not efficient. Water pipes had been plugged up for three months, the air conditioner didn't work, and it wasn't really an apartment if you considered there was just one big room with a screen around the useless toilet. Also there was a stained-glass window. How efficient is that? You can't even see through the damn thing when somebody's waiting outside to mug you. But it suited Swine.

I picked up Swine minus his radio, and we headed for Davie. The way I saw it, the first order of business was to check out my electric fence theory. I needed Swine since he could identify one of the bad guys.

I took forty minutes to reach the house with the electric fence. As we cruised slowly past, I sized up the place. Where would these dummies keep twelve . . . eight cats—make that seven, since ornery Kelso had escaped their evil clutches.

The driveway to the house led to a one car garage but alongside

the cement drive was a dirt road that ran about eighty yards back beside the makeshift corral to the rear of the property. Parked back there was a battered old tan truck with a camper on the bed. The screened windows were open. If I'd been a betting man . . .

I stopped the Mustang at the turnoff to Willie's road and turned to Swine. "Here's the plan. I go up and knock on the door. You sneak around the house and check out the camper truck in the back yard."

"What about my radio?" asked Swine.

"I told you. You will get a new radio when I get paid. I don't have the cash right now." Swine mumbled to himself unhappily. I made the turn and headed back to the house.

I glided into the empty driveway quietly except for a squeaky protest from the Mustang's brakes. Swine slunk out of the car as we came to a halt and in a bent-over, loping stride raced toward the old pickup.

He reached it before I got out of the driver's side door. He took a peek in the side window and began to jump up and down. Waving at me frantically, he ran back toward the Mustang. "Truck full of cats!" he reported in a winded condition.

I didn't want to do anything rash. After all, ten grand was riding on those cats. All I had to do was get them safe and sound back to Willie's. I considered stealing the truck. Umm . . . I guessed the best thing was to confront

the catnappers and inform them that the jig was up. I trooped up to the door with Swine in tow.

The Clyde who answered the door was a real beefeater with a couple of chins. And his face did sort of resemble a toad: little flat nose with nostrils pointed out at you, small warts strategically placed among detonating pimples on a puffy face.

"That's him!" Swine informed the neighborhood.

"What you vant?" said Toadface in a thick German accent, eyeing Swine's agitated state nervously.

Swine moved in front of me. "Okay, Adolph, you can cough up eighteen bucks for my radio, you Nazi bastard."

"Mine name is not Adolph. Und do not call me Nazi . . . you . . . you svine."

Swine turned to me. "How the hell does he know my name?"

I pushed Swine aside.

It took about fifteen minutes to get the story from Toadface. Olin Schmidt turned out to be his name. He was an assistant trainer working for Max Van Dietrick, one of the hundreds of hapless one- or two-horse trainers who struggle through the winter thoroughbred meets in Florida.

Schmidt talked freely. He made a point of telling me several times that the law couldn't touch them anyway. All they did was kill a couple of cats. As suspected, they'd heard of Willie's champion handicapping status, also about his cats, from the backstretch gossip. They hatched the plot when they discovered that

they were renting a farm just behind the famous handicapper. Times were tough. They needed to pick up some cash in order to move their string to Beulah Park in Ohio, where the competition wasn't nearly so vicious. Schmidt also divulged the fact that he and Van Dietrick were near busted betting on Willie's sorry selections.

Truth was, he was probably right. Unless the pair confessed to something greater, the law would not prosecute for the minuscule penalty that could be handed down for a few dead cats. Although it would be Willie's call whether he wanted to prosecute or not.

I agreed not to call the cops, and Schmidt agreed to drive the camper truck full of cats over to Willie's.

I rode shotgun with Schmidt. Swine followed in my Mustang. Willie had already left for the track. We couldn't get into the garage, so the three of us each grabbed some cats and walked around the house to the patio. Once the cats were safe on the patio, I cut Schmidt loose. He told me again how useless it would be to bring the police into it.

That seemed to wrap it up. All that remained was to find Willie, tell him the good news, and collect my ten thousand. As it turned out, more remained than I suspected.

I left Swine in the grandstand, plunked down a dollar at the clubhouse exchange, and bounced up the steps to Willie's spot in the

clubhouse. Willie was alone, Oscar and Potato Nose nowhere in sight. "Good news, Willie," I said. "Got all the rest of the cats back safe and sound on your patio."

A knurly grin fought its way across his stony, creased face. "By God, I knew you could do it. I told Oscar you'd get the job done." The smile receded. "I want to know who was responsible—who took my cats?"

"Yeah . . . okay. But before we get to that, I should tell you that it might be a waste of time to prosecute. The law . . ."

"I ain't gonna prosecute. I just want to know who they are."

"Well, Willie, there's the matter of my fee. The deal was ten grand. You set the price. I know you spoke in the heat of the moment. But as far as . . ."

Willie dug down in his trousers and dragged out a wad big enough to clog a toilet. "Here's five hundred on account. Meet me here tomorrow. I'll have the balance for you." He pushed the money into my hand. "Now, who are they?"

"*They're all in the gate!*" the announcer warned.

Ten thoroughbreds danced in anticipation, awaiting the start of the seventh race.

"*They're off!*"

The break was good except for Countmein, who stumbled to his knees out of the gate. It dawned on me that this was Willie's cat race. I was congratulating myself on not getting stiffed again on one of Willie's hot horses. As I watched, Countmein gathered himself. He gained ground steadily

to the far turn and began to pass the pack five wide. He was three back at the top of the stretch. He caught the front runner fifty yards out and won by a long neck.

Countmein paid ten sixty, six eighty, four twenty—an excellent price. Willie seemed unconcerned. "Who are they?" he repeated.

I recounted to Willie the exploits of Swine and myself in the discovery of the two dumbbells, Schmidt and Van Dietrick, and the return of the remainder of the cats. "Be here tomorrow," Willie said, and turned away.

Evidently our business was concluded for the present. Swine wanted to stay at the track after I paid him off. So I left without him. I swung by the phone company and paid the delinquent bill. They promised to have the phone reconnected the following day.

At first post the next afternoon I found Willie alone at his spot in the clubhouse. He handed me an envelope. "Let's keep this whole deal between me and you, okay?" I nodded stupidly, staring into the envelope. It was the first time I'd ever seen a thousand dollar bill.

I dropped three hundred at the track and headed back to the office. A strange noise greeted me as I breezed though the office door: the sound of my phone ringing.

It was Lew Demarco. In all the excitement I'd forgotten all about my call to him. "Never mind about the profile, Lew," I began. "The whole deal is finished now."

"Oh no," said Lew. "I did the work, and I'm going to collect the two hundred. Anyway, you'd better hear who you're dealing with."

The first thing was that Willie didn't have a sick sister. He didn't have a sister. And his parents didn't die in a car accident when he was young. His mother was still alive. But it got worse: Gus Romero was an underboss for the New Jersey mob.

Willie had found a home with the mob after he quit race riding. The word on the street was that Willie was a button man, a contract killer. And according to Lew, he was one of the very best, only used on the most difficult jobs.

It finally made sense and explained a lot. Sid the bookmaker must have known. He practically fell to his knees when he realized I was working for Willie. And it explained the income—no wonder Willie could keep up an expensive house and pay ten grand to get back a few scruffy cats. And the death of Travis and Willie's ex-wife in the trailer fire, no mystery there either. Come to think of it, impersonating a world champion handicapper isn't a bad way to account for unexplainable income.

Where did all this leave me? Willie couldn't be aware that I knew what he was. Naturally, it wouldn't stay that way long if I opened my mouth. It would be

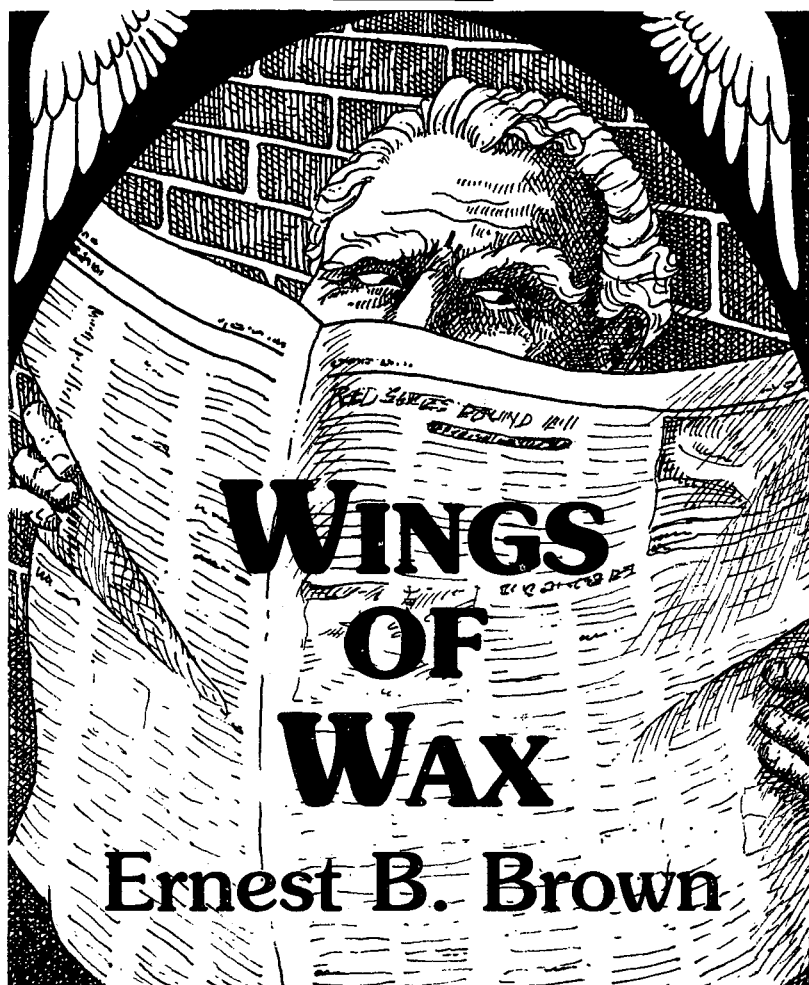
extremely life-threatening to spill what I had learned about Willie: I gave a lot of thought to that. All the same, I began to worry about what Willie might decide to do about his cats.

I reasoned that surely Willie realized that those three dead cats were not worth a man's life. But I didn't totally convince myself because, let's face it, I didn't really know Willie at all. I spent some time trying to figure out what Winston Churchill would have done in my place. It became too late real quick.

Six days later it was a big splash in the papers. The killings were described as savage. Barbed wire was girdled tightly about their necks and used to hang them from a pine tree in their own back yard. They strangled to death.

I never met Max Van Dietrick, but Olin Schmidt wasn't totally evil, just ugly and stupid. I had thought I'd done him a favor by not calling the cops. Like Schmidt said, it would have been pointless to call the cops; the cops couldn't touch them. But nobody warned them about Willie. . . . Nobody warned them.

It's over now. Life goes on. But when it comes to heroes, I guess I'm down to two. And you know, I read an article at the barber-shop a few days back about Winston Churchill. It made me start to have second thoughts about *him*.



Boston simmered under a hazy mid-August sun. A blanket of humid air hung over the city, and although it was hot enough to bring down Icarus, I didn't think the bruiser leaning against the building across the street pretending to read a newspaper had landed there because the sun had melted the wax from his wings. He

didn't look like the type who ever had, or was ever going to get, a pair of wings. He'd been standing out there dripping sweat on his newspaper for two hours.

The walk down three flights and a dash across Commercial Street between delivery trucks driven by homicidal maniacs and semis spewing diesel fumes dampened my forehead and plastered

the shirt to my back. I walked right up to him, but he pretended not to notice me until I spoke and then only his eyes moved. Beady little weasel eyes snapped up from the newspaper and glared out at me from under gray, shaggy brows, like a predatory animal watching its prey from the underbrush.

"Listen," I said, "I have at least another hour on the computer and a handful of phone calls to make before I go anywhere, so why don't you come on up where it's cool. I have a couple of Harpoons on ice; you can sit right there and relax and have a cold one and keep an eye on me while I finish up. I'm afraid you're going to get heat stroke standing out here in the sun."

His lip curled up to show a scummy, yellow eyetooth when he spoke. "You're a f— dead man, Hammond."

He turned away, tossed the paper into the gutter, and lumbered off down Commercial Street in the direction of the Aquarium, his two-hundred-plus pounds rolling from side to side as he walked.

I turned the paper over with my toe and looked down at the front page. It wasn't even today's paper; it was yesterday's *Herald*.

I went back upstairs, leaned against the window frame, and stared south down Commercial Street over the top of my ancient air conditioner as it wheezed and sputtered its way to a draw with the August swelter. The Neanderthal with the beady eyes and

the not-so-subtle message was nowhere in sight. When I'd first spotted him across the street, he had looked familiar, but after face-to-facing him I was sure I'd never seen him before.

Nothing I was currently working on was important enough, or involved enough money, to warrant sending hired muscle around with a message of impending doom. For that matter I couldn't think of any case I'd worked on in the four years since I'd left the service and set up shop that was consequential enough to evoke a death threat.

I'm a card-carrying member of The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Local #34, and for three or four months out of the year I pound nails for a living. I also carry a license issued by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts "to engage in business as a private detective" and work the remaining eight or nine months snooping around the Greater Boston area.

Most of my business comes from insurance companies who use subcontractors to gather evidence of fraud in workmen's comp cases. As a rule, the guys they send me to investigate don't even end up in jail. They're usually just working stiffes who figure they've earned a couple of months off and, what the hell, the insurance companies are loaded. So they fake a fall or a back strain, sign up for the disability checks, and then get themselves seen doing something stu-

pid like bowling with the Thursday night league or pitching for their softball team on Sunday afternoons or loading trucks at their local lumber yard. When the insurance company calls them in and they see themselves starring in one of my videos, they are usually more than happy to agree to some kind of restitution and to allow their names to be put in the intercompany database in return for the insurance company's promise not to prosecute. It's all too minor league to generate a death threat. It seemed more like someone's weird idea of a joke, although I hadn't noticed much humor in the beady little eyes.

I had a hunch I hadn't seen them for the last time. I sat down at the keyboard and went back to work on the final report for a case I'd just finished for Boston Indemnity.

Diane Hunter's office is far enough up on the north side of the Hancock Tower to afford an impressive view of the Charles River Basin dotted with sails from the Community Boat House and the austere neoclassic buildings of MIT sitting smugly on the Cambridge side of the river.

Hunter is ex-Boston PD, a determined little redhead who took early retirement after losing the sight of one eye trying to take a baseball bat away from a drunken husband in a domestic disturbance. Now she handles all the outside investigators who sub-

contract work from Boston Indemnity. She was standing straddle-legged, arms folded, in front of a small TV screen watching the videotape I had shot yesterday of a young man named Cristos Daidluson. He was collecting workmen's comp for a disabling back injury. On the screen, four men in their late teens or early twenties were engaged in a spirited game of two-on-two hockey on Roller Blades.

"Quite agile," I said over her shoulder, "for a guy with a busted up back."

She leaned forward and squinted at the screen. "Yeah, the problem I'm having here is—you shot this, Hank, so you know which one is Daidluson, but I'm not sure anyone else could single him out from that distance."

"Just watch for a minute."

I had shot the tape from the sidewalk outside a fenced basketball court, and on the screen one of the skaters kept turning toward the camera. He suddenly veered sharply, knees bent, body low, and cut directly toward me; stick held out chest-high in both gloved hands, he slammed into the fence. The rattling of the chain-link all but drowned out a guttural string of curses.

I jabbed the stop button on the remote in Hunter's hand. Daidluson's brutish features were frozen on the screen. Small dark eyes closely set in a face flushed red with rage, black prodigious brows, an aquiline nose, and a mouth twisted into a bestial snarl.

"That help at all singling him out?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I do believe Mr. Daidluson has collected his last check from Boston Indemnity. His career will be considerably shorter than his father's was."

"Father? Was he scamming the insurance companies, too?"

"He made a living at it, and they never nailed him for it either. He was the classic case. He started in Bakersfield, California, sometime in the late 1950's and worked his way east. He'd get a job on a construction site, fake an injury, collect comp right up until they were about to tumble to him, and then pull up stakes and move on to a new state and a new insurance company. This all happened B.C., of course."

"B.C.? Before Columbus?"

"No, before computers. Anyhow, he winds up here in Boston twenty years later, just about the time the major insurance companies are getting their fraud database up and running. By the time they figure out that the guy's claimed injuries and gone out on comp more than twenty times in at least eighteen different states, he has retired and dropped out of sight."

"So they never went after him?"

"The insurance companies aren't about righting wrongs or seeking justice, they're just looking at the bottom line. Digging this guy out and coming up with enough evidence to prosecute

wouldn't be cost-effective. They operate on the old ounce-of-prevention philosophy. They figure the time and money are better spent grabbing first-timers and getting them into the database, thereby scuttling any ideas they might have about making it a career."

Hunter nodded toward the TV, where Daidluson's snarl was still frozen on the screen. "Case in point. Once this ugly sucker's in the shared database, he'll have a tough time getting another buck out of Boston Indemnity or any other insurance company in the U.S. of A."

"By the way," I said, "speaking of ugly . . ."

"So you're saying this guy threatened to kill you and you don't have any idea who he is?"

"Never saw him before. And what he said was, 'You're a dead man, Hammond.' I don't know about you, but I take that as a death threat."

"Is that exactly how he said it?"

"To be precise, he modified 'dead man' with an oxymoronic participle of the four-letter obscenity used to express the act of engaging in sexual intercourse."

"You've gotta stop staying home nights reading, Hank. I'm afraid it's rotting your brain. You're starting to sound like some kind of an intellectual."

"I could take that as a cleverly disguised hint to ask you out."

"You could—and you could take Teddy Kennedy as a clever-

ly disguised Republican, just don't put down big money on either one. What I was getting at was exactly how he used your name. If he called you Hank, the chances are pretty good he was sent by someone who knows you. And if it's someone who knows you, you should be able to come up with some ideas about who it is. But if he called you Bradford, or Brad, he probably got your name out of the phone book, or saw the Bradford Henry Hammond on your office door or on one of your cards, in which case it could be anybody, you wouldn't have a clue."

"But he called me Hammond, so that's no help either way." I was starting to say something about its probably being just some nutcase I had accidentally jostled on the sidewalk or cut off on the road when I noticed Hunter wasn't listening. She was staring into space, eyes half closed, lips parted, and the tip of her tongue showing between her teeth, oblivious to the commotion she was stirring up in my libido.

"That guy from Everett three or four years ago," she said, "the ironworker with the mattress on his head, what was his name? He went out on a neck injury, and you caught him on video coming down the front steps with a mattress on his head—he was helping his brother-in-law move or something."

"He was moving in with his brother-in-law," I said, "because his wife had taken out a restraining order on him. McClusky, his

name was McClusky. He was working on one of the temporary roadway supports for the Big Dig and took a spill off a scaffold."

"Yeah, McClusky," she said, "that's the guy. So after we had him in for a private showing of your video and he'd signed off and they were running his name through the mill, the computer kicked out his doctor's name on a repeat. He had a small clinic in Brookline that had been listed as the treatment provider in a half dozen previous cases. They put a pair of company investigators on it and came up with enough to take it to the attorney general's office. When the A.G. had him brought in, he went out and got a highpriced criminal lawyer who eventually tried to get the good doctor a deal for ratting the guy he claimed was bringing him and a couple of other doctors the phony comp cases."

"Did they offer him immunity?"

"No, but they did let him plea-bargain the fraud charges down to conspiracy to commit. The guy he turned, Peter Harrington a.k.a. The Piper, had two priors for insurance fraud in Rhode Island but no convictions. He had been an officer in one of the labor unions down there. Anyhow, what he was doing up here was recruiting construction workers who wanted to take a little time off, coaching them on how to fake a comp claim, and then steering them to one of the doctors he'd lined up to verify the injury. He'd take a cut from the worker out of

the comp checks and a kickback from the doctor. He had a good thing going till they grabbed him."

"Did they get a conviction?"

"He got eight to ten at MCI Cedar Junction. Now, there's someone who might be pissed off enough to wish you great bodily harm."

"I wasn't directly involved in that; I had nothing to do with his case."

Hunter frowned. "That may not be the way he sees it."

I wanted to stop by the McCormick State Office Building on Ashburton Place on my way back to the North End, but not being up for the downtown traffic, I cut over to Storrow Drive. Hunter had offered to try to chase down Harrington's current address for me and find out if he was still inside. It was possible he had been paroled, or as Hunter had so enthusiastically suggested, "Maybe he busted out."

"Somehow I doubt you'd have missed noticing that in the news," I'd said.

Feeling that it wouldn't enhance my professional image to have the person at Boston Indemnity who hires me to do detecting have to do detective work for me, I told her not to waste her time messing with it. I said I'd shoot over to Ashburton Place on my way back to the office and see if I could dig up someone involved in the original case. I was hoping to find someone who was not only familiar enough with

the case to know Harrington's present whereabouts, but might know if he had a nasty-looking associate who fit the description of the troglodyte who had hinted at my eminent demise this morning.

On Storrow Drive, despite the heat and humidity, a handful of die-hard joggers in brightly colored Spandex were pounding along the paved walkways of the Embankment by the river. And if the expressions on their perspiring faces were any indication of their pain, they were most certainly undergoing great gain.

I drive an ancient ancestor of the Subaru that Paul Hogan careens around the desert in, pursued by post-apocalyptic bad guys in those TV ads. I was driving with every window in the little wagon open, the air conditioner having long since leaked the last of its fluorocarbons into the atmosphere. I'm sure that somewhere I'm on some environmentalist's most-wanted list for being personally responsible for one little corner of that ragged hole in the ozone layer.

As I approached the underpass by the Hatch Shell, the growl of a heavy truck engine rushed in through the rear windows and filled the car with a rumble that made the old plastic dashboard rattle. The growl rose to a roar as the driver ground the transmission into a lower gear. In the mirror I saw the towering grille of a one-ton pickup whip out to pass me; in my peripheral vision I saw him wheel all the way over to the

left-hand lane. I snapped my head around just in time to see him cut the wheels and head directly toward me.

The underpass abutment was coming up fast on my right; there was no place to go. I jammed on the brakes, almost standing the Subaru on its nose, and the truck shot in front of me with a good inch to spare. He swerved sharply to avoid the abutment he had tried to run me into, and his rear end slid into the concrete with a bang that sent up a shower of sparks and a cloud of dust. He corrected the skid, straightened out, and sped off beneath the underpass.

Behind me there was a high-pitched chorus of brakes squealing and tires screeching across dry pavement. In the mirror I saw a brand-new Audi, white smoke billowing from its wheel wells, nuzzled up to my rear bumper. The young woman sitting behind the wheel was holding one of those big-bottomed commuter coffee cups in her right hand. Most of whatever the cup had contained was running down the inside of her windshield, but I knew from the grimace on her face and the way she was staring down at her lap that not all of the cup's contents had hit the windshield.

There was a lot of horn honking going on behind the Audi, and cars were starting to pull out around her. The Subaru had stalled, and by the time I got it started again, there was a very angry young woman standing

beside my open window. She had a nasty-looking stain on the front of her skirt and coffee running down both legs, and she was using a highly imaginative combination of adjectives to describe my driving. I smiled and said "sorry about that" and took off into the underpass.

There was no sign of the truck. He was probably halfway to Charlestown by then, but I had caught a glimpse of the driver's face. I'd had a hunch this morning that I'd not seen the last of those beady little eyes.

"I'm sure you understand, Mr., ah—" he leaned forward scowling and looked down again at the business card I had placed on his desk—"ah, Hammond, Mr. Hammond, that we can't just open our files to anyone who walks in off the street."

He was wearing a dark blue, three-piece, obviously custom-tailored suit, a white button-down shirt with a fine blue stripe, a silk tie in Harvard colors, and enough cologne to make my eyes water. I had gone through a metal detector, a "sign-the-register-please" guard, an information-desk guard, a receptionist, an assistant to the secretary of the Office of Administrative Personnel, and an assistant to the secretary for the offices of the assistant attorneys general—all that just to get scowled at by this yuppie who, as it turned out, was just an assistant to an assistant attorney general.

"I'm not asking to look at your

files. I'm just trying to find someone who worked on the Harrington case who can tell me whether or not he still gets his mail at Cedar Junction and if he ever associated with anyone who fits the description of the hulk who tried to marry me to a bridge abutment on Storrow Drive this morning."

"I'm afraid we can't disclose the present whereabouts or the current legal status of any person who has been, or is being, investigated or prosecuted by this office. Divulging such information would not only violate that person's right to privacy, it would violate departmental policy. And that policy applies to anyone seeking information from this office: journalists, private citizens, or—" he leaned forward and scowled at my business card for the third time "—or private investigators."

Michael Callaghan (it was engraved on a polished brass plaque fastened to a triangular strip of oiled teak on his desk) looked about my age, a shade under thirty, but was already proficient in the practice of bureaucratic obstruction.

"I'm not trying to violate anybody's right to privacy here, or violate any departmental policy; I'm just trying to get a little information on someone who appears to be attempting to violate my right to exist."

"Have you reported this alleged incident to the police department?"

"No, I haven't reported it to the police, and it's not an *alleged* in-

cident; the guy tried to ram me into a bridge abutment with a truck."

"Yes but, you see, we don't take accident reports here."

"It was no accident. I think he was trying to kill me."

"So you've said, but even if it's an attempted assault with a motor vehicle that you want to report, or if you wish to sign a complaint against someone for attempted assault, you have to go to the police station in the district where the incident occurred. I believe you said this happened on Storrow Drive. That would be Area A, District 1."

After another few minutes of fruitless questioning expertly parried with bureaucratic jargon, I could see that I wasn't going to get anywhere here. If I wanted information about Harrington, I'd have to go through unofficial channels.

I stood up and smiled and said, "Thanks for seeing me anyway, and thanks for all your cooperation, Mr., ah—" I leaned forward and pointedly scowled at the nameplate on his desk "—ah, Callaghan, Mr. Callaghan."

As I turned to leave, he said, "Always glad to be of service. Feel free to call on me any time, Mr. Hammer."

Smart-ass little bastard had to have the last word.

After the cool, conditioned air inside the office building, stepping out onto the street was like stepping into a sauna. The midday August heat sucked the musty-

smelling grime up out of the sidewalks and streets and mixed it with the humidity to form a foul haze that hovered just above the buildings like the mist above a swamp. I walked to the parking garage and got my wagon out of hock—twelve bucks because I'd run a couple of minutes over the one hour minimum—and headed down to Haymarket Square. At the foot of Sudbury Street I squeezed in between two slow-moving semis and crept up the ramp onto the southbound side of the expressway. My unofficial information channel is in Plymouth, thirty-five miles south of Boston, and he doesn't do business over the phone.

At the Braintree split, where Interstate 93 out of Boston is joined by Route 128 and becomes Route 3 south, the highway turns east for a few miles. In the summertime there is usually a noticeable change in the air at that point. The temperature drops a few degrees, and you can smell ocean in the air. Not so today. What little breeze there was came out of the southwest, and the wind coming through the open windows was hot and oppressive and smelled of exhaust fumes, not the sea.

I got off the highway at Kingston, stopped at the Burger King and ate a Whopper with cheese in the car, and then continued down Main Street into Plymouth. Cordage Park is the site of a nineteenth century rope factory that was in production until shortly after World War II. The

old factory complex, the group of buildings closest to the street, has been renovated and turned into a shopping mall, and Wal-Mart has put in a mammoth outlet on the north end of the site. I drove through a couple of acres of parking area behind the stores and over a rusted railroad spur into a complex of long-abandoned, weatherbeaten warehouses and outbuildings. Long rows of crumbling concrete loading docks and gaping doorways into dark and empty spaces were a ghostly remnant of a time in history when American production had won a world war.

At the far edge of the complex where it meets Plymouth Harbor, Martin Lee leases a narrow, flat-roofed, terra cotta warehouse of indeterminable age. It runs lengthwise out over the water with its far end sitting on piles. The only access is through a large metal overhead door in the near end of the building. I drove up to it under the watchful eye of a security camera and blew my horn. I had called Lee from the car on the way down, so he was expecting me. There was a click and the soft whir of an electric motor, and the door rattled up. I pulled in and parked alongside Lee's Land Rover, got out and walked over to the only other door in the small cement block garage area, and stood in the baleful stare of another security camera. The door buzzed, its bolt clunked back, and I walked in.

Gray metal shelving packed floor to ceiling with cartons and

cardboard boxes ran the length of the two outside walls. Postage meters, tape dispensers, and rolls of brown paper were scattered about on a long worktable in the center of the room. Lee runs a legitimate electronics and computer equipment mail order business out of the warehouse.

He was seated with his back to me in a swivel chair on casters in front of an array of monitors, keyboards, and hard drives that covered the top of a wide, U-shaped console built into the wall at the far end of the room. It is here that he does his real business.

If you need information about anything or anybody and it's out there somewhere in somebody's database, Lee can almost always get it. He'll sell it to you for a fee. Martin Lee is a professional hacker par excellence.

With some reluctance, giving the screen a last sidelong glance, Lee swiveled around in his chair and looked up at me through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that had enormous round lenses thick enough to have been cut from the bottoms of beer mugs. The pale, almost translucent skin of a face that never sees much sunlight was stretched tightly over high, prominent cheekbones; hollow cheeks, a puckered mouth, and a pointed chin completed the illusion of an animated triangle topped with an unkempt tangle of jet black hair. I don't have a clue about his physical stature—in the four years I've been doing business with him I've never seen

him anywhere but seated in his swivel chair.

"How's it going, Hank? Still peeking around corners for insurance companies?"

"Yup, me and my camcorder, The Peekerton Detective Agency—We Never Bleep."

Lee shook his head sadly. "Hank, Hank, Hank, how many times do I have to tell you, that style of gum-shoeing went out with trenchcoats and fedoras." He reached over and patted the top of a monstrous IBM monitor. "You've gotta get into the computer end of investigation today if you want to make any money."

"Thanks, but for now I'd just as soon keep that gap of reasonable deniability between the information I buy from you and how I came by it."

He gave me a wicked grin. "So what is it you're looking for this time that you can't find legally anywhere else?"

I gave him the score on Harrington's workman's comp scam and his conviction and told him I needed to know whether or not he was still boarding with the state and, if not, what he'd left as a forwarding address. I also gave him the short version of my near miss on Storrow Drive this morning and a description of the thug with the overhanging brow and the beady eyes and told him I needed to know if that fit any of Harrington's known associates.

"This will take a few days," he said. "I'm really slammed right now."

"I'd appreciate your getting it

as soon as possible," I said. "It's kind of a personal health issue with me."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Let me see what I can do. Maybe I can juggle some stuff around and slip you in ahead of someone. I'll give you a call when it's ready."

He swiveled back to his computers—my cue to leave—and was clickity-clacking away on the keyboard before I'd reached the door.

I worked my way back to Route 3 and pointed the faded nose of the Subaru towards Boston.

Even with all the windows open, the air inside the car was stifling. Through my windshield the pale sky had a yellowish tinge, and off to my left towering thunderheads were piling up on the western horizon.

The coffeeshop occupying the ground floor of the converted granite wharf-building that houses the corporate offices of Bradford Henry Hammond, Private Investigator, was, as it usually is at that time of the afternoon, almost empty. I wheeled into the side parking lot and slipped into a space under a sign that announced—in the trademark tangerine and magenta colors—that this space was reserved for coffeeshop patrons only. The back stairway leads past four office suites on the second floor to the third floor loft area where storage bins, closets for cleaning and maintenance equipment, and my

office share the space under two-hundred-year-old roof beams.

I knew I had trouble as soon as I hit the third floor. My office door was standing open. I reached for the little S&W automatic that usually lives in a clip-on holster just behind my right hip; I came up empty. The gun was down in the wagon where I had stuffed it under the front seat rather than go through the hassle of checking it in and out at the McCormick Building that morning. Flattening myself against the opposite wall, I edged forward until I could see into the room. The office is only nine feet wide with the door at the hallway end and a window twelve feet away at the other end. I could see it was empty. I stepped in over splintered pieces of stop-strip that had been gouged out of the lock side of the doorjamb with a pinch bar. An amateur job. Any kid in the neighborhood could have opened that key-in-knob lock set with a credit card in fifteen seconds flat.

All the desk drawers were upside down on the floor, their contents scattered among the folders and papers that had been dumped out of my file cabinet. I stood ankle-deep in the debris wondering what the hell they'd been looking for. It sure wasn't merchandise to peddle for a quick buck because an almost new eighteen-inch Toshiba with built-in VCR and my computer sat unmolested on the desk. It had to be something in the files. The Red Sox would win a World Series before I got this mess picked

up and I'd have to sort the stuff out and refile it before I could see what if anything was missing.

I sat on the edge of the desk and looked at the rat's nest of paper on the floor. The whole thing was starting to feel wrong to me. A death threat and an attempt to run me into a concrete abutment I could buy as revenge, but trashing my office didn't seem to fit.

I picked up the phone and punched in Hunter's number. Knowing her, my suggestion not to bother wasting her time messing with the Harrington thing would be all she'd have needed to start poking around in it. I decided to swallow my pride and see if she'd had any luck.

Hunter's office is on the floor below Boston Indemnity's main offices. She doesn't have a secretary or an assistant and her calls don't go through the main switchboard, so when an official sounding male voice answered her phone, I knew something was wrong.

"Ms. Hunter's office."

"Ah, yeah, let me talk to Hunter."

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Hank Hammond, may I ask who's asking?"

"May I inquire as to the nature of your business with Ms. Hunter?"

"Not until you tell me the nature of your business and who this is."

"This is Detective Ellis, Boston Police Department. May I ask the nature of your business with Ms. Hunter, Mr. Hammond?"

"I do some occasional poking around for Boston Indemnity; Hunter handles all the independent subcontractors for them."

"Licensed investigator?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see her, Hammond?"

"This morning, ten o'clock this morning. What's going on?"

"Where are you?"

"My office, Commercial Street."

"I think you'd better get over here right away."

I cut through the North End to Haymarket Square, around to Government Center, down by the Common, and up St. James Avenue to the Hancock Tower, and despite some moves in traffic that would have made Terry Labonte envious, the ambulance was just emerging from a service door at the rear of the Hancock as I pulled into a space on Trinity.

They were not in a hurry; no wailing siren, no flashing lights, not a good sign.

I crossed the sidewalk, ducked under the slowly descending overhead door, and was met by a BPD uniform who escorted me to a service elevator and up to Hunter's office.

A couple of crime scene techs were hanging around in the hallway outside the office waiting their turn to go in. Just beyond them in the corridor a plainclothes detective with an open notebook was interviewing a handful of office types. His eyes came up from the notebook and followed me in.

A fingerprint specialist and a photographer were working the room under the watchful eye of a second detective, whose demeanor clearly indicated he was in charge. Desk and file cabinet drawers had been yanked out and were yawning open and empty, their contents scattered on the floor; books and looseleaf binders lay in jumbled piles where they'd been swept off the shelves. In the center of the beige carpet a blocky outline of the place where a small body had sprawled was delineated in masking tape. The dark red splotch of blood that occupied most of the upper torso area was already drying brown around the edges.

Detective It-is-I-who-am-in-charge curtly dismissed the uniform who'd escorted me up and, beckoning with his notebook, summoned me into the room. Well-cut, well-fitting, but well-worn gray summer-weight suit; blue shirt, maroon tie; tall, medium build, somewhere in his late thirties; brown hair graying at the temples; slate blue eyes and that hard stare that so often goes with the badge.

"Hammond?"

"That's me."

"I'm Detective Ellis. May I see some I.D.?"

I handed him my driver's license and my P.I. ticket. He looked at them for a few seconds, handed them back, and then jotted down the information from memory. Sharp.

Still writing and without looking up from his notebook he said,

"On the phone you said you were with Ms. Hunter this morning."

"Yes, I was here in her office this morning."

He glanced up from his notes and caught me staring at the gruesome outline on the floor.

"Large caliber," he said, "at point-blank range; death appears to have been instantaneous. What did you say was the nature of your relationship with Ms. Hunter?"

Cops and trial lawyers, they're both good at it, burying an implication in an innocent sounding question. He watched my face for a reaction. He didn't get one.

"As I said on the phone, I do investigative work for Boston Indemnity as an independent subcontractor. I get—or got—my assignments from Hunter, and I turned in my reports and my invoices to her."

"And this morning were you picking up an assignment or turning in a report?"

"Turning in a report," I told him. And in answer to his question, "About what?," had started to give him a condensed version of the Daidlusion case when the tech who had been dusting a set of shelves behind us for fingerprints tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the floor.

A fat, stubby cartridge casing was nestled in the carpet where it met the baseboard. It didn't take a firearms expert to see that the expended brass was .45-caliber.

Detective Ellis squatted down on his haunches for a closer look.

My eyes wandered up to the bookshelves above his head, and I suddenly realized what had bothered me about the appearance of the office when I'd first walked in. Like my office it had been trashed, but unlike my office not completely. The top half of the bookcase over Ellis's head and everything to the left of it looked like the aftermath of a tornado. The bottom half of the bookcase and the rest of the room to the right of it looked untouched. Whoever was tossing the office either had been interrupted or had found what they were looking for.

On the shelf over Ellis's head Hunter's evidence tapes were lined up on edge with their labels showing. I leaned in slightly and scanned them. The one with my handwritten DAIDLUSON label was not there.

Ellis straightened up, took me gently by the elbow, and led me into the corridor saying, "We'll finish up out here." On the way he spoke to the two techs who were waiting by the door, and while we continued the Q and A, I watched over his shoulder as they measured out the location of the newly discovered shell, located it on a sketch, and bagged it.

"Are you licensed to carry?"

"Yes, I am."

"And what do you carry?"

"One of the new S&W Tactical Series compacts, but it's not a .45, it's a point four-oh."

He pursed his lips and nodded appreciatively. "Good eyes."

Ellis continued his question-

ing, but I was only half concentrating. I was trying to remember where I'd left my office copy of the Daidlusion tape this morning.

It was that hour of the day when the city's streets get quiet, late enough for most of the commuters to have fled but too early for the night people to be out and on the prowl. The approaching thunderstorm had brought a premature dusk punctuated by the occasional flash of distant lightning. Splashes of light spilled out of the windows and doorways of bars and fast food joints onto the almost deserted sidewalks and gave the streets the haunting look of an Edward Hopper painting.

I had left Detective Ellis with the assurance that I had no plans to leave town and a promise to go by the station in the morning to sign a full statement.

As I worked my way up Commercial Street around the temporary barricades and flashing yellow lights of the Big Dig, the sound of thunder rumbled through the open window. By the time I parked at my office, raindrops were splattering against the windshield and drumming on the roof. I rolled up the windows in the wagon and made a dash for the stairwell.

I took the stairs to the loft two at a time and had almost reached my office door when he stepped out from behind a storage bin and stuck something cold and hard against the back of my neck.

"Nice and easy, open the door and turn on the lights."

His breath against the side of my face stank of bad teeth and booze. I shoved the door open, took a swat at the light switch, and walked all the way to my desk before I turned around.

Beady-eyes-and-shaggy-brows was holding an old government-model .45 automatic this time instead of the Boston *Herald*.

"You've had a busy day, Daid-luson: two break-ins, a death threat, an attempted vehicular homicide, and a murder. What did you have in . . ."

"Cut the chitchat, Hammond. Where's the video you shot of my son?"

"You already have it. I just came from Hunter's office. The tape's gone. I know you grabbed it."

He brought the big automatic up to shoulder height so I was staring right down that gaping sewer-pipe of a barrel.

"Don't screw around with me, Hammond. She told me you've got a copy."

"So you already had the tape when you shot her. If she gave you the tape and told you about the copy, why'd you kill her?"

"She didn't give me the tape. I searched her office and found it while she was at lunch. And I didn't kill her, she killed herself."

"Oh, I see. She decided to commit suicide, and you just happened to be there so you lent her your gun."

"She came back as I was leaving with the tape and got in my

face with a lot of cheap crap about not getting away with it because you had a copy. Then the dumb broad jumps me and tries to yank the gun away from me, and it went off."

He was shaking his head as though he still couldn't believe it. I believed it. I could picture Hunter getting fired up enough to tackle a guy twice her size even if he had a gun. I tried to keep him talking to stall for time.

"I figure you followed me to the Hancock this morning, but you didn't know who I'd gone to see in the building or where, so you came back here and tossed my office and got Hunter's name off my file copy of the report. What I can't figure is what you thought you'd gain by running me into a bridge abutment."

"You had it coming, snooping around taking pictures, trying to screw up my son's life. Besides, the way I see it, you have a little accident and get yourself killed, you won't be testifying against him."

"Testifying against him? You mean testifying in court? Nobody is going to court. The insurance companies never press charges against first time offenders in penny-ante cases like that."

He didn't look even a little convinced. I had a feeling the questions about the location of my copy of the tape were about to get serious.

The storm that had been rolling in broke overhead and unleashed its full fury on the city; rain slashed in sheets across the

window behind me and hampered on the old roof above our heads. A flash of lightning filled the room with a brilliant white light, and a crash of thunder shook the building; Daidluson flinched instinctively and blinked. I lashed out with a kick aimed at his groin. He saw or sensed it coming and twisted away so the toe of my boot missed its mark, but it struck his wrist with a nasty sounding snap. The gun tumbled to the floor. He sank to his knees clutching the broken wrist to his chest, saliva and a low moan bubbling through his clenched teeth.

I slid the gun under the desk with the side of my foot, grabbed the phone, and punched in 911. On second thought, I disconnected and tried Hunter's number. Ellis was still there.

"Ms. Hunter's office."

"Ellis, Hank Hammond, I'm at my office; why don't you shoot over. The guy who killed Hunter is here drooling all over my floor."

For a few seconds there was nothing but the crackling static of the electric storm over the line.

"Is he in one piece?"

"Yeah, he's okay, but he'll need a ride to Mass General. He broke

his wrist while he was surrendering."

Daidluson had rolled off his knees and was sitting against the wall with his legs splayed out in front of him, his wrist still pressed to his chest. The hand was hanging sideways at an unnatural angle, and his face had gone white and sweaty.

I picked up the remote and turned on the TV, pressed the VCR power button, and hit PLAY. Cristos Daidluson and his buddies on Roller Blades filled the screen in living color. I let the tape run to the point where Cristos had skated up to the fence, and then I pushed the STOP button. The old man, jaw clenched, face distorted, sat staring up at the snarling image of his son on the screen. I could see the family likeness. Had I seen it sooner, Hunter might still be alive.

"Is that what you were looking for, Daidluson?"

He didn't answer.

It was still raining like hell, but in the distance I could hear the sirens like a banshee's wail above the sound of the storm. This time it was the old father who was going to take the fall.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



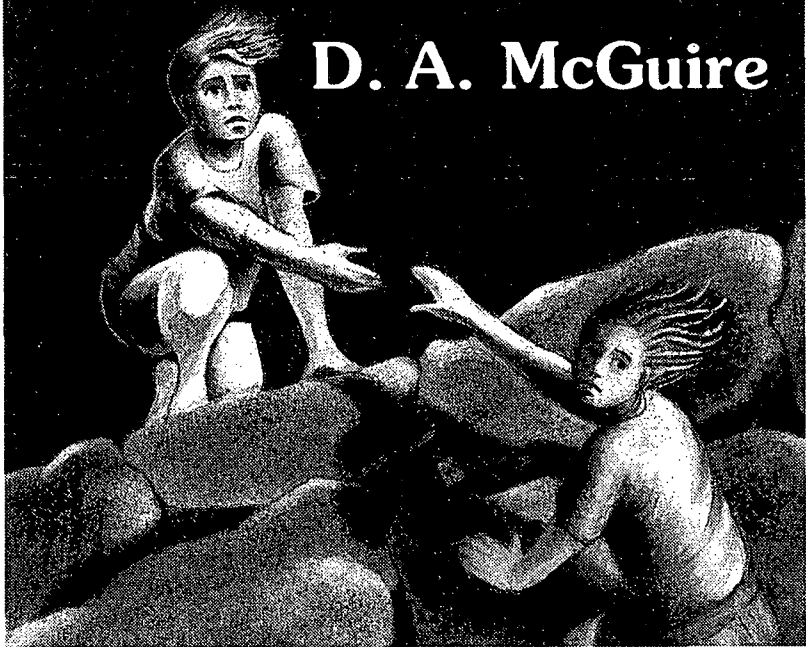
Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Stuff like this has happened before, huh? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

THE JET STONE

D. A. McGuire



It never would have occurred to Carrie if her aunt hadn't mentioned moving the peonies.

"They're getting bigger every year. Pretty soon they'll be taking over the whole yard."

Carrie turned from where she sat on the bottom step of the porch and watched Aunt Minnie come out of the house. She was wiping both paper-white hands on the faded blue apron tied around her waist.

"Should have been moved years ago. Your father put them in, you know," Minerva Drew went on, her accent stiff, New England.

Funny, Carrie thought, how she noticed that. At one time Carrie couldn't even have imagined a New England accent, but after being away from Manameset, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for ten years, she realized there really was such a thing.

"I moved some of them, divided them up," Minerva Drew said,

pointing with a fluttery hand. Her other hand was working under the apron nervously. Carrie's father had called them her "worried hands." Always moving, twitching, fretting.

And at that thought Carrie felt a lump at the back of her throat and looked off, murmuring, "Do what you want, Aunt Minnie. Would you like me—" A pause as the cool Cape air slapped her in the face and memories rushed up, hitting her with equal force. There was no way Carrie could make sense of them, or stop them, so she turned her head, and said, "—to help you move them?"

Caroline Anne Drew wasn't by nature a generous or warm person; her aunt knew that. Perhaps that's why she shook her head at Carrie's offer and muttered, "I don't know," then came down the steps carefully, one hand on the rickety wooden railing. Matt Drew would have seen to that railing long ago. Indeed, Carrie's father would have seen to a lot of things around here.

The fading paint. The chipped caulking around the windows. The unweeded patch of flowers behind the step. He'd have taken care of them all just as he had taken care of Minnie, his only sister.

As he had my mother, Carrie thought, sitting hunched forward squinting at the clump of peonies in question. They were at the corner of the house—her corner of the house, where her father had put on an extra room.

For her.

But Minerva Drew was proud, perhaps too proud. She had a way of just "letting things go," reluctant to accept the money her niece sent so faithfully each month.

Carrie edged over to share part of the step with her aunt, and they sat in silence a few minutes. That was one of the few ways Minnie was like Carrie's father: Carrie could sit comfortably in her aunt's presence and never feel the need to say anything.

Besides, Carrie had learned long ago that time will pass without one's having to do very much about it. Just like the time, twenty years now, that had passed between her and the memories and the peony bushes that were threatening to overtake the lawn at the far corner of the house.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Carrie finally said. "I haven't offered to do anything else this trip back. Damn it, the least you can do is take me up on this. God knows, you'll never hire anyone to help you."

Besides, Carrie realized, she had her own reasons for wanting to dig up the peonies.

"Tell me what to do, Aunt Minnie, and I will," she went on. "Move them? Throw them out? Separate them? What's that pile over there?" She pointed to a long, low pile of what looked like junk: branches, pieces of rotted fencepost, brown grass clippings, and two black garbage bags filled with pine needles. Carrie's "ecologically correct" West Coast

friends would have been horrified at Minerva Drew's obvious disregard "for the environment."

"Throw them out?" The older woman was shocked. "I'll have you know your Great-aunt Millicent Drew started those peonies herself. I'll not have them thrown out. I'd just as soon have Elmer Hornton come and take them for his own garden. He's admired them for years. I'm surprised he hasn't come in the dead of night already and cut out several roots for himself."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding. Millie Drew put them down when she was just a bride—"

"No, I mean about Elmer Hornton. He wouldn't come into your yard and dig up your flowers, would he?" Carrie looked at the clump of pale pink, gently trembling peonies. They looked as fragile as her aunt's pale, nervous hands now clutched in a fold of her apron. But fragility was just an illusion, Carrie knew, for though her aunt was pushing eighty, she was a strong, hale, and hearty old woman, able to fend for herself in almost any situation.

"No, 'course not. Elmer's a gentleman." Minerva Drew laughed softly. "He's offered to come paint the porch, fix the rail, repair the gutters." She laughed some more. "'Course if I could find a hammer, a bucket of paint, could do it myself."

And Carrie didn't doubt it. She gave a backwards glance at the house. It was a big house, solid,

Cape-style, with porches front and back. Brown shingles turned to a soft, weathered gray; white trim, and an unattached garage that drifted just a bit to starboard. It was an ordinary house; you wouldn't have noticed it unless you were looking for a house that spelled out CAPE COD in capital letters. But it needed work, a lot of work. Carrie wondered briefly just why her Aunt Minnie was letting it go like she was.

"Elmer still grow pumpkins and squash out by the road," Carrie asked, "so all the local kids can steal them?"

Her Aunt Minnie's eyes turned on her in a flash, mild blue eyes that could go steely gray in a second.

"Elmer'd be down here right away, working his dear old heart out, if I asked and not expect a penny for his trouble."

Carrie just stared at her. If Minnie needed her help or approval then why didn't she just ask for it? Carrie wouldn't have said no, even though she liked to keep her obligation to her aunt—and the other way around—to a minimum. Still, she would have written an extra check for all the repairs without a second thought. And Minnie knew it.

But Minerva also knew her niece hadn't come this time by choice. Carrie had made that plain from the start. It was a trait all the Drews shared, Carrie Anne, her late father, and Minnie: no mincing of words or affections.

"A week is all I can stay, long

enough to pay my respects to Larry's family, and then I'm gone," had been Carrie's first words to her aunt, said a day ago as she climbed from the hired limo. Only after seeing her aunt's slight, sad nod had Carrie let Minnie kiss her cheek.

"Look, I'll dig them up, separate them, whatever you want," Carrie offered again, and as she did, she felt her heart leap. That surprised her; there was a tension there, a sense of uncertainty and curiosity.

But also a sense of dread, one she hadn't felt in twenty years. Carrie selected the next few words with the same caution she reserved for business dealings. "Because I'm curious, you see?" She leaned forward on her elbows, resting them on her knees. She wasn't looking at her aunt but at the overgrown and rather mangy-looking peony bushes. She was wondering why she had admitted that.

"Curious, Carrie?" Minerva edged closer to her niece. Carrie moved, too, almost off the bottom step.

"Morbidly so." Carrie gave her aunt a quick glance. The old hands were twitching in the apron again. "Oh, I suppose it's stupid, but you do remember, don't you, that Dad used to—" She bit her bottom lip. "But after all these years? What would be left, right?"

She was quiet. Overhead a pair of gulls cried out. Car horns honked from a road nearby that had once been a peaceful backwoods byway. No longer. This

part of Cape Cod had undergone a rapid expansion of commercial and residential growth that was almost criminal. Strip malls and video arcades stood where heavy-headed marsh grasses once grew; convenience stores and condominiums squatted where there had been woods for children to wander. It just wasn't the same any more.

And yet one small part of it might still be the same—might have remained.

"Be left?" Minerva said at last. "What are you talking about, Carrie?"

She shrugged. "Dad buried some of our pets under those peonies. A canary, a couple of parakeets, your cat. I mean I think he buried them there, so probably it would be better if I moved them for you. I don't mind, really."

"Don't be foolish, Caroline! You're talking twenty years ago! There'll be no bones under that bush!" Minerva rose suddenly, one hand moving to Carrie's shoulder as though she needed support to get up, but then she withdrew her hand quickly before she could touch her niece. "Come in the house, it's getting cool out here. We're going to have a fog. I'll warm us up some stew."

But Carrie didn't go in right away. She sat awhile longer as the sun went down and the cold breeze grew stronger against her back. She was too caught in the past and in memories that began as a fast, furious assault of dull, faint images. At first there were

too many; she couldn't make sense of them. The only thing she could be certain of was their intensity and their insistence that they be noticed. They were like a class of small children, unruly children, all pushing and shoving their way to be first in line. There was no discipline to them.

Carrie had to give them discipline. She had to sort them out, make sense of them. And as she did, each image slowly began to separate from the rest until they formed a single row—a line of clear, complete, concrete pictures.

Some of the pictures were good, gentle, benign. The secret cove, the old woman in the house at the end of the beach. But there were others that had a dark edge to them. They were black or gray and, though clearly defined, devoid of all color. Simply put, they seemed bad: the church, the ripped screen in the window, the chase down the boat ramp and across the beach to the seawall.

Yes, that she was remembering all too well. And the way her heart had beat so hard and fast that she just knew it was going to burst.

But what about the jet stone? Which had it been? Brightly polished and filled with a black light—had it been good? Or had it been something else? Hadn't the old woman claimed it could work in one of two ways? So which way had it worked for her?

Where was it now?

"Have you seen or heard from

Ray Willett?" Carrie asked as she sipped her tea. The stew had left a hard lump in her stomach. She found she was no longer accustomed to heavy New England food. And though she'd forced down enough to satisfy her appetite, it hadn't been nearly enough to satisfy her aunt. As she'd been asking about Ray, Minerva had been going on about how Carrie had once been such a . . .

" . . . robust child, Caroline. I don't think eating salads and drinking herbal teas are all a person needs. Where do you get your vitamins? You know what your father would have called that?" She pointed at Carrie's lettuce and tomatoes.

"Rabbit food. And I'm not a child, Aunt Min, and when I was, I was a fat child."

Minnie just nodded, apparently not wishing to start an argument over something so trivial. Most of their battles were in the past now. Caroline was her only living relative, and the checks she sent each month to take care of the house more than supplemented the meager amount the older woman received from Social Security. Minerva Drew's days of berating her niece and of telling her parents how to raise her were over.

"Ray?" Minerva Drew was relieved to change the subject. "Oh, Carrie, didn't I write you? Ray passed away last fall. Leukemia. You didn't know? I didn't send you the newspaper clipping?"

Carrie paused, the rim of the

cup at her lip. "No. I didn't know, but it's all right. Ray and I were just . . . childhood friends."

More memories suddenly. Carrie shut her eyes briefly, feeling a headache coming on. She hadn't come home for this. She hadn't wanted to come for the reasons that she had. She hadn't even wanted to see her aunt because she didn't want to feel guilty for not coming more often. This house. Memories of her parents, and those damn peonies, and now hearing that Ray . . .

Was dead? Had Aunt Minnie written her? Perhaps she had, but the temptation to make her aunt feel bad about not doing so was too great. "No, you never wrote me about Ray."

"Oh, but I should have written you. I thought I had." Minerva sat down at the table opposite her niece. "I'm sorry, but you two were more than just childhood friends. You two were inseparable as children."

"Yeah? Well, someone should have separated us, Aunt Minnie, long before we got to be twelve or thirteen." Carrie took a quick sip, letting Minnie digest that for a moment.

"Caroline?"

"Oh, Aunt Minnie, I'm not fooling you any. Ray and I were a pair of hellions. We were horrible. And you were right, most the time, about him and me. Mom and Dad were—"

Carrie paused, feeling that groundswell of memories come alive. This time they were right there, bright and strong and

overpowering. The sensation wouldn't last.

"They were wonderful," Carrie said, sighing. "Too wonderful. Sometimes parents should be horrible and risk being hated by their kids. You knew that. I should have been beaten black and blue for some of things I did. God, when I think back . . ." She turned away from the table.

"You two weren't bad kids, Caroline, you—"

"Oh, not all the time," Carrie agreed, half laughing. Aunt Minnie was staring down at her cup, worried hands wrapped around it. She was being so careful, damn it! Always so careful not to offend the young woman she depended so excessively on. So careful never to ask what Carrie did out in California. Didn't Minnie wonder? Didn't she want to know? Carrie had told her once that she was in the "import-export" business, and Minnie had bought it. Damn! She needed Carrie too much; she didn't want to know. Minerva Drew's dependence on her niece was almost as frightening as it was annoying.

"We did bad things, Aunt Min."

"All children get into mischief sometimes."

"I'm not talking about mischief, I'm talking about really bad things. And I thought you knew. I really thought you did."

Minerva Drew's hands were working around and around the coffee mug. "So you threw pumpkins at Halloween," her aunt said, "Or switched real estate signs. Really, Caroline, that was

all so long ago!" She tried to laugh and couldn't.

"It seems like yesterday." Carrie took another sip from her cup. "Ray and me, and sometimes Lisa and Leenie Bragg. I'm not talking about squashing pumpkins in the road or switching For Sale signs. If that was all—" She was frustrated and angry at her aunt's pretended ignorance. It was a sham. Minnie knew what Carrie was talking about because she'd always known when Carrie had gotten into trouble. Always.

Or at least it had seemed that way.

"What are you talking about, Caroline?" There was a different tone to her voice; it was the sound of a younger Aunt Minerva, the adult Carrie most feared as a child, the woman who'd confront Carrie's father with, "She's not the angel you take her for, and I should know."

Now she looked at Carrie with those steel-gray eyes. There was a bitter taste in Carrie's mouth, and it wasn't from the organically grown herbal tea. Minnie's hands were suddenly still, lying flat on the table: long, pale, slender fingers.

Suddenly Carrie felt like a little child again. And she hadn't answered, so Minerva repeated, "What are you talking about, Carrie? You weren't the one who drowned Mrs. Tarkenton's cat?"

"No." Carrie wanted to lunge across the table toward her. Her father's table. The table he had built without nails—Carrie had

handed him each peg in the garage when she was a little girl. "You mean whoever threw it off the jetty? Oh, no."

No, that hadn't been Carrie, nor Ray Willett either. The children had been properly horrified by that, just as everyone else in the neighborhood had.

"That's a relief." Minerva pulled her hands back and curled them around her mug. Then she began to work them up and down over the flower design. It was a habit that had nearly worn the design away.

But God. This was so awful. For a moment Carrie had seen another Aunt Minnie, the Aunt Minnie of her childhood. But here she was, folding back up into this Aunt Minnie, this timid and cowering Aunt Minnie.

This old woman who was afraid of Carrie.

"No, I didn't mean anything like that, but there were other things and I'm surprised you didn't know."

"You weren't bad children," Minerva insisted.

"But we did bad—" she shut her eyes and as she did a white steeple blew up before her, sudden, beautiful, and bewildering in its clarity—"things."

"You never talked back. You were good to your parents. You did well in school." Minnie was up, clearing the table. "You did your chores without complaining. You didn't run around with a fast crowd..."

Such a lie, Carrie thought. When is she going to admit it to herself?

"... came in on time and were never reckless with the car or money ..."

Who needed money, Carrie thought, when I had Ray? Ray always had pocketfuls of cash.

"... and you've taken more than good care of me. I'll have you know I brag about you, Caroline, down at the senior center ..."

Because Ray always knew where the cash was kept.

"Ray and I used to go skinny-dipping."

"Carrie!"

Minnie nearly dropped a cream pitcher in the sink.

"We did. At the cove we had discovered, up the river. We'd cut through the woods behind the church. You know the one—on Melrose Avenue that they had to rebuild? We went almost every night that summer."

"That summer?"

"I can't believe you didn't know." Carrie watched her aunt carefully as she filled the sink with soapy water. Minnie had a dishwasher; her father had insisted this kitchen have a dishwasher. Her mother had used it, but Carrie had never seen Aunt Minnie go near it. Carrie would have to ask about it, if it needed repairs ...

No. Minnie would have to tell her if she needed anything.

"You went skinny-dipping—with Ray Willett?"

It wasn't the worst thing Carrie had ever done; it didn't even come close. But Carrie was afraid if she didn't tell her something, she'd tell her about the church.

The church they'd burned down and how they'd been chased that night, and about the old woman in the house at the end of the beach.

Even more, Carrie was afraid she'd tell her about the jet stone.

"What ... what summer was this?" Minerva was still filling the sink; it looked as though water might spill right over and on to the floor.

"The summer I turned twelve. Nineteen seventy-seven."

"Well, I wouldn't call that a bad thing, more like a naughty thing. You were children, after all, and at night? Oh, Carrie." Minerva twisted the faucets off. "Everyone does that at least once. Even I—"

"With a boy?"

"Caroline Anne Drew, are you trying to shock me? You were only twelve! Just a child!" She came to clear the table. "All children do things like that. Play doctor or spin the bottle and go skinny-dipping. It's perfectly normal even if adults seem to be horrified by it. I wouldn't worry about it."

Carrie said nothing more and looked out the windows to the porch.

Her father had added this porch on, just as he'd redone this kitchen, building and putting in cabinets himself even though he wasn't a cabinetmaker. He had done all the plumbing, too, but wasn't a plumber. Wallpapered and put in a new hardwood floor, but wasn't a paper-hanger or a carpenter. It seemed Matt Drew could do just about anything.

Aunt Minnie was quiet. Carrie could hear the clink of dishes in the water, the metal chime of silverware, the dull thud of bowls hitting the bottom of the porcelain sink. Carrie rose to get another cup of tea.

"It's always hard coming back, isn't it? Especially if you don't . . . very often. Though you're always welcome, Caroline." Minerva had her back to her niece, was stacking dishes in the drying rack. "After all, this is your—"

"It's not my house," Carrie interrupted irritably. "It's your house. You live in it. These are your dishes, and this is your furniture, and out there—" she waved in the direction of the back porch "—are your damned peonies. All I do is pay the bills, Minnie, which I can certainly afford to do and which I'm glad to do because truthfully I want nothing to do with this house." She set down her cup and turned away, feeling bitter, foolish, and very stupid.

"Caroline."

"I'm sorry." She shoved her hands into her pockets and looked out the door, which her father had framed and hung, past the porch and steps that he had built . . .

And across the yard he had planted and weeded and tended to, the peonies at the corner of the house. There they were, waving their flowers beside the part of the house he had put on so she could have a room of her own. Suddenly she wanted to cry.

"It has a way of doing that,

coming home," Aunt Minnie said. "When you don't do it very often. Not that I'm critical, Caroline, because I understand you have your own life now. I'm sure you're very happy out there in California, and I know you wouldn't be here if you didn't have to be."

"It started that summer, you know," Carrie whispered.

"What did?" Aunt Minnie was behind her, drying a cup in her hands.

"Everything, Aunt Min. Everything I am." She wiped her eyes.

"Oh, Carrie." Minerva shook her head slightly. "It's this funeral, isn't it?"

"What?" Suddenly Carrie was confused.

"I know how it is," Minnie answered. "I have a friend who cries whenever she sees a hearse go by. It doesn't matter who it is, whether she knows the deceased or not, it reminds her of her own father. It still hurts, and even though you're here for your ex-husband's funeral, you're feeling hurt for your parents." Minnie put her hand on the younger woman's shoulder, a gesture that surprised Carrie but one she didn't shun.

"It's not just that," Carrie said, feeling like a child under her aunt's gentle touch. That surprised her, too: thirty-two years old and still capable of feeling like a little girl. "It's the memories of that summer. They're coming back all at once, and they're hard to deal with."

"There's no discipline to them,

is there? They all want your attention at once?"

How did Minnie know that? Carrie met her eyes; they were gentle now, but difficult to look at. Minnie had always been a kind and caring woman, even when she'd been most critical, demanding that her parents "take a harder line with that girl now or you'll live to regret it later."

Carrie had resented that. Part of her still did. She also resented that Aunt Minnie was still here, that both of her parents were gone. She also resented the fact that Minnie had been right all those times.

She moved just enough so Minnie's hand would fall away, then looked out at the peonies, moving and fluttering in the darkness. The breeze off the bay was strong tonight, and she doubted there'd be much fog. Aunt Minnie had been wrong about that, surprisingly. But she hadn't been wrong about Carrie.

Minerva Drew turned away soundlessly to finish the dishes.

Carrie went in the early afternoon, during the first of four sets of visiting hours, to make her peace with Larry and Larry's family. They were very generous and kind, considering she was only Larry's second wife and he'd had two after her. The latest wife was there, the only one of the four truly entitled to be called "widow," but Carrie felt like a widow. She felt as though she'd

suffered an equally great loss as she sat in her drab dark suit in a corner of the local funeral home. She was talking to Wife Number Three.

Pamela Something. She'd remarried. Pamela's Husband Number Two was mingling with some people Carrie didn't know. But Pamela was very friendly—and very fat. Perhaps Carrie's weight problem hadn't bothered Larry as much as she'd thought it had.

Maybe that's why he married Carrie, though she had been relatively thin at the time of their wedding. But by the time she and Larry had split up, she'd put on a good forty or fifty pounds. It was a novel idea, to imagine that Larry might actually have liked her heavy. It gave her something to mull over as Pamela Something prattled on about her real estate job.

"So nice of you, Carrie." Suddenly the conversation changed around to her. "Flying all the way here to see Larry. Tell me, what's the real estate market like out there?"

But before Carrie could shift gears to respond, Pamela had turned to a woman on her other side to explain who Carrie was. This was a source of great interest to the other woman, who was nearly as fat as Pamela and as it turned out was Pamela's sister. Carrie found it amusing to be described as "caring" and "generous" by the very woman who'd stolen her husband from her.

Truth was, Carrie was neither

caring nor generous. She was simply exhibiting a trait from her mother's side, of doing what you're obligated to do, no matter how uncomfortable or disagreeable it might be.

Carrie couldn't explain that to Pamela Something. She doubted Pamela would have understood. She was slowly realizing just how stupid this woman Larry had left her for really was. Funny, Carrie hadn't known it at the time. Still, she had no hard feelings against Pamela. In fact she was almost congenial.

"Yes, I'll be at the funeral," Carrie heard herself saying, and, "No, I don't think I'll return tomorrow. Being waked for two days seems a bit dragged out to me."

But Pamela exclaimed, "Oh, but Larry had so many friends! Certainly you knew that?"

"Of course." Carrie shifted gears again. "I just hope my coming hasn't upset Maureen. I'll try to stay out of her way."

"Oh no!" Pamela patted her shoulder with one chubby hand, and Carrie thought to herself, why couldn't Larry have seen me one last time, seen how unbearably thin I've become. But life was funny, more funny sometimes than it was strange or unpredictable.

"Maureen's a wonderful person. So is Laura." Pamela nodded in the direction of Wives Number Four and One. They were sitting in opposite dark corners surrounded by their own friends and children. Carrie nod-

ded at them both, though she barely knew either of them. She was wondering if Wife Number One had hated her as much as she had once hated Pamela.

When the visiting hours were over, she went for coffee with Pamela and her sister. All they had in common was Larry—even the sister had Larry in common, Carrie thought—but what did it matter? She'd given up all rights to the man ten years ago. At this stage of her life Caroline didn't care whom he'd been with or why.

In fact, she really wanted only one thing, to have this funeral over and done with. Then she'd get on a plane and get out of here. Already she was worrying about things in L.A. She'd left people in charge out there she only half trusted.

Pamela's sister leaned over to her. "You know, Caroline, Larry was wrong about you."

Pamela gave her sister a quick nudge in the side. Carrie doubted the sister felt it.

Still, Carrie was amused. "What did Larry say about me?"

"He used to say you were cold," the sister said. She gave Pamela a dirty look as she got another nudge. "Well, he did, Pammy. He used to say Carrie Drew was a very cold person." Now a smile at Carrie herself. "And that maybe California would warm her up."

Carrie just smiled back and stirred some more sugar into her tea.

Carrie was sitting on the porch

steps again, hunched up against a sudden change in the breeze. It was cool and damp like yesterday, and she could hear her aunt moving around in the kitchen, making coffee for herself, tea for Carrie.

Then her aunt was there, wiping her hands on her apron. There were two cups on the porch railing. She picked them up and started down the steps without using the rickety railing. Carrie quickly rose to help her.

"Thank you, Carrie. Are you sure you wouldn't like me to get two chairs from the garage? I hadn't thought to put them out yet, but—"

"I like sitting on the steps."

"Not good for your back to sit all hunched up like that."

"I'm fine, but if you'd like a chair—"

"No." Minnie joined her niece on the step. It seemed neither of them wanted to be in each other's debt, no more than was inevitable.

"So? How was it?" Minnie asked. "Were any of his other wives there?"

"All of them. But it wasn't sad. It seemed kind of . . . ordinary. In fact, all funerals seem rather ordinary to me, I've been to so many of them." Would Aunt Minnie understand that? Would she want to? "And I'll move that peony or separate it," Carrie went on. "Whatever you want after I change my clothes." She was still in funeral costume: dark suit, plain black heels, hair in an up-swept braid. She thought she

looked ten years older although everyone at the funeral home had insisted on how "great" she looked.

Great. That was a word often used at funerals. "Don't you look great?" and "How's California? I've heard it's great!"

As well as: "And Larry, doesn't he look great?"

But let's not talk about what really killed Larry Marcacelli. Let's not mention the booze and the drugs and the gambling debts.

"It's all right, Caroline. It's just that they're getting so big and bushy. I'm surprised they keep flowering year after year. It really isn't bothering me."

"What does bother you, Aunt Minnie?" Carrie turned and lifted her knee against the rise of the next step. Then she put her back against the tired old railing and wiped some loose hair from her eyes.

"Not very much, Carrie. I'm satisfied with my life. I do wish you'd visit more often, but I know how it is. You've your own friends, your business interests, and I keep busy, I really do. I volunteer and teach Sunday school. I have my bridge ladies and my sewing club, and I read."

"Are you lonely?"

"Lonely? Oh, sometimes, but not really that much." Minnie's hands began to slide up and down the sides of the warm mug. Worried hands again. Worried about what? Why was she staring at the peony bush? Or was she looking somewhere else? "I pass the time. I keep busy."

But she was lonely and that was the scary part, scary because Carrie was wondering if someday she'd be just like her aunt. Alone. And lonely.

"You volunteer." Carrie looked down into her cup and, knowing it would astonish Minnie as much as it did her, said, "I volunteer a bit, too, Aunt Min. Hospital near where I live. Pediatric ward."

Minerva Drew sucked in her breath. She might as well have been hit with a shovel. "You volunteer, Carrie?"

"Nothing big." Carrie downplayed it quickly. "Got to give something back, you know? It's easier to write a check and I do that, too, but sometimes it's nice to—" She looked up, met her aunt's kind but shocked eyes. "Well, funeral's day after tomorrow."

"Yes." Minnie still hadn't caught her breath. "Would you like me to go with you?"

"No, you don't need to. Now, where do I put that damned bush?"

Minnie didn't answer, just looked down, cradling her cup, and Carrie realized her aunt had pushed closer to her; they were touching side to side. That wasn't easy for Carrie to accept. Her normal reaction would have been to pull away. Larry had been right when he'd told Wife Number Three how "cold" Wife Number Two had been. Affection was difficult for Carrie, even with Aunt Minnie.

"And make me a list, why don't

you, of any other chores you need done around here."

Minnie raised her head to look at her niece. But what was she looking for? Sarcasm? Irony? She'd see neither.

"Carrie, you are a good girl. You really are. I was hard on you when you were a child and I regret it now."

She put one trembling hand on Carrie's wrist and squeezed it lightly, then quickly took it away.

"I'll show you what to do with that bush."

It was such a terrible disappointment. Carrie could think of nothing else as she washed her hands in the sink behind the garage. They were filthy, broken nails, grime in every crease of her palms. Aunt Minnie didn't have any gardening gloves, and Carrie hadn't felt like running down to the hardware store to get some. So she had used a rusty old shovel, a bent digging trowel, and her own bare hands to lift and separate the peonies. It had been a monster of a job: roots running deep into the lawn where the soil was firmly packed. It was like digging up concrete. Carrie didn't know if it was the right time to move such a plant but didn't care. Because she hadn't cared about moving the thing to begin with. All she cared about was what she'd find under the peonies. And she'd found nothing.

Nothing! No bones. They'd long ago rotted into the soil just as

Aunt Minnie had said they would. But she also hadn't found a small metal box, even after digging up and moving every bit of the huge, clumpy plant. Carrie had insisted to her aunt that it would be better to get the whole plant off the lawn, not merely separate it. Now there were three medium-sized peony bushes growing along the fence dividing her property from that of the people next door.

There was also a huge, gaping hole at the corner of the house. She hadn't filled it in yet. With the shovel Carrie had dumped every bit of dirt that had been around and under the peony onto the lawn and sifted through it with the trowel. Then she'd gone through the dirt with her bare hands. She'd even gone back into the hole, reaching to its bottom and digging some more until she struck a grayish, sandy soil. But there had been no box. No bent and battered, dirty metal box.

Where had it gone? Had that particular memory been totally wrong? She heard Aunt Minnie come around the corner of the garage. "I'll fill in the hole," Carrie told her. "My hands were getting sore, and I broke two nails. I'll go finish it now."

"No need to," Aunt Minnie said. "I already did."

"You filled it in?" Carrie asked, astonished. "With your back?"

"Digging's hard, filling's easy," the older woman said with a grateful smile. "What do you say we get some fish tonight from the Clam Shack?"

After dinner Carrie decided to take a walk on the beach. The onion rings were doing a slow churn in her stomach, and she needed the fresh air. She'd discovered she could no longer tolerate greasy, fried food, and her whole system was rebelling.

Besides, she needed to be alone, to think and make sense of what she hadn't found under the peony bush.

She grabbed an old sweatshirt of her father's from the front closet, asked her aunt, "Want to come?"

There was no feeling in the offer, however, and both knew it. Minerva turned back to her book. "No, you go alone. The chill at night—it isn't good for my back."

So Carrie said nothing else, just left for the beach at the end of the street.

The water was perfect that night, still and like black ink. As she stood there watching the occasional boat come in for the night, she realized the memories were finally forcing a confrontation. They were still unruly, like the boisterous schoolchildren they were, but they stayed in line now, had found the discipline of the teacher if not their own.

She settled down on the grassy bank above the seawall and listened to the waves slap the rocks below. Slowly she remembered what the old woman had told her.

That the jet stone could only bring good fortune. But it was how the jet stone brought that

fortune that made it deadly. If one's character were good, then prosperity, success, wealth would arrive through one's own goodness.

But if one's character were, well, dark, there'd still be prosperity, success, and wealth, but they would arrive in a slightly different manner.

Carrie sighed, shut her eyes, and remembered.

The church had been wrought of white wood and stone: simple, plain, clean. Carrie couldn't remember the denomination, though it barely mattered. It hadn't been her family's church; indeed they had no church, though Minnie had always been a faithful Methodist. But it hadn't been Aunt Minnie's church, either. It was just a place, a building with an open window and a ripped screen that Ray Willett and Carrie Drew had stumbled upon one late September evening. It had all happened quite by chance.

That's how Ray and Carrie always did things, by chance. They had never planned anything. How many twelve-year-old kids do? They just came across things, got ideas, then acted upon them. Carrie understood what they were then; twenty years later she could put it into words. She and Ray were impulsive. They lacked self-control, never thinking out the possible consequences of any action. The two of them just did.

That's how they found the open window, that ripped screen. They had been cutting across the church parking lot heading for the wooded area behind it. It was a place where scrub pines and oak trees slowly gave way to marsh and then to a series of inlets feeding into Manamesset Bay. The locals called this whole area of inlets, coves, manmade ditches and streams "the river," though only one part, a large freshwater stream coming out of Miller's Pond to the west, was anything close to a real river. Actually it was an estuary, but no one called it that then. It was just the river, running wild, zig-zagging through the marsh and out into the bay. Farther up the river Ray and she had found a tiny, sandy-bottomed cove where they often swam in the early evening just as it got dark. It was deserted and a good place to cool off before trudging home to chores, dinner, homework.

When they first found the secret cove, they thought they were the only ones who knew about it. There was no dock or house up on the bluff, no boat or moorings in sight, no sign of human life anywhere. The sand in the cove was white, not the gray-black muck one usually found along the ditches and banks, and the water was warm and still and virtually free of weeds. Above and to three sides was a huge bluff covered by pines, sea roses, and beach plum bushes. The hum of car traffic, boats, and even train whistles was a far-off

sound. Incredibly, it had seemed they'd found a place no one else knew about.

And that's where Carrie and Ray went skinny-dipping, though it had been so dark when they did that they never saw anything, or at least Carrie never did. But that wasn't the worst of it because it wasn't enough for Ray just to find something no one else had, he had to explore it. And once he knew every inch of the secret cove, he quickly became bored. There were no crabs here, he said, and no fish, not even any eels, and how much swimming can you do?

That's when he considered the church. "We'll just go in and look around," he told her.

The open cellar window, the ripped screen, were too inviting. No, too tempting.

"They had a fair over the weekend," he continued, seeing her reluctance. "So they've got food in there, candy bars or something. Come on."

Come on, Carrie, he said with a whine in his voice. Come on. It was the same whine that made her help him switch For Sale signs on people's lawns, or snitch candy from under the cash register while he paid for a pack of gum. The whine later made her "hold his cash for him," or meet some of "his brother's friends," in parking lots as they transferred small paper bags of . . .

"We won't do nothing," Ray went on, flicking back his mop of long black hair. "Just look."

She could remember standing

there holding the beach towel against her chest. Sun going down. Warm, late summer wind whipping up through the trees, bending the oaks. They'd been planning to take a swim, then go on home.

"Come on, Carrie." His hand in the crook of her elbow. "We'll just go in and explore."

So she did. Went into that beautiful, peaceful, and, later she learned, historic church—that church of no particular denomination or importance to her—and found the kitchen. Yes, they found the boxes of candy bars sold at the fair.

But they also found something else.

When Carrie returned, she found Aunt Minnie in the same position, head bent over her book. The radio was turned on low to some talk show: two people arguing. Sports. Politics. They were all the same in Carrie's opinion.

She walked in silently, pulling the sweatshirt over her head, and turned the radio off.

"How was it? Did you meet anyone you know?" Minnie tipped her head up, and Carrie was amazed at how white her aunt's hair looked in this dim light. The glow of the lamp over her shoulder seemed to accentuate the pale gray hairs in her once-dark head of hair.

"No. But it was very peaceful." Carrie walked to the only window facing the back yard, but she couldn't see her corner, where

her room used to be. Her parents had made it into a den after she ran off with Larry. Dens were very popular in the early eighties. Carrie remembered feeling disappointed when she saw it later: rows of books no one ever read, shelves of ordinary knick-knacks covered with dust, a fold-out bed for company who never came.

Her. Carrie was the company who never came. Not until long after both her parents were gone.

Still, she couldn't see out to that part of the house; out to the hole she'd dug and her aunt had filled in. She'd clear away the rest of the soil tomorrow, maybe do a few odd chores. Maybe she'd nail down that rickety wooden railing or put some paint on the porch, or caulk a few windows.

Maybe.

And maybe it was too late for her. Maybe it had been too late long before the old woman on the beach; maybe her fate had been sealed from the moment she'd gone into the church with Ray.

"It's strange. I could've sworn . . . no, no, I was very sure." Carrie was speaking more to herself than to her aunt. She looked at Minnie's pale face framed by yellow lamplight and said, "I know you said the bones would be gone, but some of our pets were put in boxes or blankets, and oh—" Carrie sighed "—I know it sounds macabre, but I thought I'd find parts of them. That's why I didn't want you to do it."

"I knew you wouldn't," Minnie said matter-of-factly, putting her

book aside and folding her hands in her lap.

"What?"

"The place where your father buried your pets—it wasn't there."

"Yes, it was. Dad always buried them under the peonies at the corner of the house."

"The corner of the house when you were a child. He finished that addition later and moved all the flowers and shrubs, including the peonies."

"When?" Carrie asked breathlessly. "Sometime after . . ." She nearly did a complete circle there in the middle of the living room. Her head was spinning.

"Nineteen eighty-four. He finished it the year you ran off with Larry. You're thinking of a different time and a different peony bush. I didn't think of it when we were talking earlier."

"Oh, Aunt Minnie, this is crazy and silly to tell you now." Carrie grabbed hold of her father's old yellow hassock and pulled it up to her, then sat on it, holding his sweatshirt in her lap. "I was looking for something when I was digging this afternoon. Something I buried there when I was twelve. I put it there, where the parakeets and canary and your cat were buried. It was something I was afraid of, something small and unimportant then but that seems so . . ." She stopped. Why now? Why was she telling Minnie all this now?

"So important now," she whispered.

But what could she do about it now? The metal bandage box

with the jet stone in it was *under the house!* She could never get at it, short of digging up the house itself.

She felt a great relief pour over her. Maybe that's why she felt safe telling Minnie all this.

"Was it in a small metal box? The kind bandages come in?"

"Yes!" Carrie cried. "My memory wasn't faulty—just confused! I'd forgotten about the addition—not forgotten about it, but that it was a different corner, and under a different peony bush that I buried . . . oh, it doesn't matter, does it? Because what's done is done, and I can't . . ." Carrie slowly began to look away, turning the past over in her mind, like shovelfuls of dirt, emptying them onto the ground, desperate to undo . . .

No! It had all been such foolishness! Superstitious nonsense! And she could tell her aunt now.

"I'll tell you what was in it. It was something an old woman gave me. Twenty years ago Ray and I were running . . ." She frowned, looked out the window again and sighed. She felt out of breath, just as though she were being chased again. "We'd . . . oh, we thought someone was following us. We weren't sure. We thought it might be our imagination at first; you know how kids are? We were coming from the river, coming from a . . . swim, and it seemed like we were being followed. Every turn we made, this person made, too. We cut across a lawn, and so did the person. Then we got nervous and we

ran down the dirt road to the boat landing. But so did the person, and then we knew . . ."

And as she told Aunt Minnie, her mind, her entire memory swept back.

"Ray! I swear to God he's following us," Carrie had said nervously. They were still too far from home. From his house, her house, or anyone they knew well enough to go pounding up to their door. And it was so dark ahead of them.

But only ahead of them, for behind the sky was lit up with a pale yellow glow.

"Down the boat ramp, Carrie, and cut across the beach to the jetty," Ray said. "We'll lose him there—no one goes that way. Grownups don't walk down there."

"Do you think he saw us come out of the church?" Carrie whispered. They were walking along at a fast clip, afraid to break into a run. People walked at night in this neighborhood, and now people were starting to come to their doors, to look at the lighted sky behind them to the east. But they couldn't run, Ray said; running would make them look suspicious. Arsonists, he said, sometimes stick around and watch the buildings they've torched burn to the ground. They do that because they're sick, he said.

But they weren't sick. They'd only meant to play with the firecrackers and matches they had

found in the church kitchen, left-overs from the weekend fair. They'd never meant to . . .

There was a whoosh of brisk wind off the water: wet, cold, but comforting, and then a foghorn bellowed out in the bay. But still the crunch of footsteps—and the dark figure making them—continued behind them.

"It'll be okay, Carrie," Ray assured her. "The firetrucks will be there soon. It's just a little fire. They'll put it out."

"He's gaining on us," she whispered. "Ray, what if he did see us?"

"Nah, he didn't. It's just some jerk trying to scare us. If he saw us—" The unspoken words. If the person had seen them come out of the church, or knew what they'd done inside, he wouldn't be following them now; he'd have called the police. "Come on."

If he'd seen them. If he knew. That was all she'd thought of as she followed Ray down the boat ramp. It was half-submerged—the tide was coming in fast. They went down as far as they could, to the water's edge, then turned left in the direction of the open bay. There was an ancient and crumbling seawall there, and as they started over it, she slipped. It was wetter here than she'd thought. Ray reached back and gave her his hand to help her over. Carrie took it; it was sticky; he was sweating.

Then they were on the other side and off across a narrow strip of rocky beach and a patch of dune grass growing against the

beach end of the jetty. Behind them was the crunch of footsteps, then a pause as someone else climbed over the seawall.

Carrie returned to the present, lifted her eyes, saw her Aunt Minnie staring at her. For a moment Carrie was confused: how much was she telling Minnie?

"That's terrible." Aunt Minnie was reaching down for her knitting bag. "Shame on him for scaring you two so. Why didn't you tell us when you got home?"

Carrie breathed a sigh of relief. She'd been very careful not to mention the church.

"I don't know why," Carrie murmured. "Maybe we were afraid we'd have to come in earlier, before it got dark, like some of our friends had to."

Minnie's eyebrows arched. "I never thought it very wise, or safe, to let you kids stay out after dusk."

No. Neither wise nor safe. For that night, twenty years ago, they were being more than followed; they were being chased. Carrie remembered . . .

The loud boom behind them and how they had turned, startled, to watch the sky light up yellow, white, even red. Whoever was following them had also stopped, turned to look. They saw him silhouetted against the sky.

Ray seized her hand and they were off, over the dunes, across the grass, and towards the jetty.

The same jetty where someone had thrown Mrs. Tarkenton's orange and white cat into the water four weeks ago.

"Not the jetty!" Carrie cried. "There's noplac to go!" The tide was coming in; the beach was narrow enough at low tide. Now they were confronting two possible routes of escape: to run out onto the stone and timber jetty jutting into the bay, or to wade through thigh-high water as it churned up to the seawall.

Or maybe a third: make their way through the water to a broken section of wall and climb up it, onto the sloping lawns there and risk a mad dash across them to the little dirt road beyond.

"Roll up your pants," Ray ordered as he slowed down to do the same. There were more booms behind them, the wails of police cars, the sirens of firetrucks. "Come on, Carrie, do it now!"

"Ray!" She should not have shouted his name. The footsteps behind them had picked up their pace. Whoever was there was running now. Carrie's shout had also alarmed a dog somewhere on the grass above them. The animal was barking furiously.

As were other dogs, somewhere in the confusion . . . in the distance.

"Carrie, forget that!" Ray whispered hoarsely and, seizing her hand, pulled her into the water behind him.

In Carrie's memory, which moved like gray ghosts blowing up across the sky, she sometimes felt a second hand, one that fell on her shoulder. She could feel its grip tighten about her shirt just as a heavy foot trod down in the water behind her. But it all

had happened so fast she couldn't sort out the sequence of when exactly each thing happened.

Memories. Like children in a row. Exchanging places. And smiling as they do so, delighting in the confusion they create.

The dog starts to bark. She shouts Ray's name. Then there's the water below the seawall. The broken section is only forty or fifty feet ahead. Ray says, "Forget that!" and grabs her hand. Someone is behind them.

He grabs her shoulder. But a light comes on, a giant floodlight that splays out from the house above them, and somebody demands, "Who's out there?"

The hand on Carrie's shoulder drops away, or perhaps was never there. Then they're climbing the broken seawall, blinded momentarily by the light. Maybe Ray is the braver of the two because it is he who mutters, "Just an old lady and a dog."

"I said—" The voice is weaker now, startled by the continuing confusion they'd left behind. The light that Carrie thought was attached to the house moves to the left. "Who's out there?"

She sees *him*, too, Carrie thinks, but whoever it is rushes back in the direction he came from—into the fog.

The fog. Carrie shook her head, aware suddenly of the silence.

Aware, as well, that the year was no longer 1977, but 1997.

Followed by the voice of Aunt Minnie saying, "Come with me, Caroline."

So she did, rising to follow her

aunt into the den, watching as she opened the small rolltop desk there.

"When your father moved those peonies—" Minnie frowned at her niece; the light in here was very poor "—he found something he thought was strange."

"He found—"

"I'm surprised he never told you. Maybe he didn't think it very important."

She reached into the compartments in back. There were bills tucked there, pens, pencils, some old fashioned cartridge pens even, and a small manila envelope with a slight bulge to it. "Maybe he thought it was left over from some kind of game. It puzzled him; then he put it aside." A little shrug. "You never did use this room, Carrie. You'd run off with Larry by the time he finished it for you."

"I know," she whispered.

"So is this what you were looking for?" Minnie turned the envelope, gave it a little shake, and a flat, dark rock the size of a half-dollar slid into her hand.

The jet stone. And it had been *in this house* all these years.

"Carrie? Carrie Marcacelli?"

That voice startled her, coming as it did out of the fog. But even before she could see his face clearly or knew who it was walking toward her in front of the funeral home, Carrie identified what he was. A cop. She could always sense a cop.

Even this one, a vaguely familiar cop, a cop who'd known Carrie's late ex-husband.

He recognized the uncertainty, the unease, on her face, just like the cop he was.

"It is you. Well, imagine that," he said with an affected friendliness she also knew. "Caroline Drew Marcacelli, all the way from L.A.? Imagine that. Come to see old Larry put away, have you?" He lit a cigarette and grinned.

"Do I know you?" she asked nervously.

"You should. I'm Jake Valari, you remember? I went to high school with Sam Willett, Ray's brother. You do remember Ray Willett, don't you?" Again that grin, slightly sinister, spread across the pale face of a man who should get out in the sun more often. He blew a cloud of smoke off to his side, looked at her again, smiling, waiting.

Of course she knew him—and hated him, too.

"I didn't know you were a friend of Larry's," she said a little coldly, swiftly regaining her composure. She was always able to do that rather well, especially with cops. He'd startled her, that was all. This man couldn't touch her, and she knew it. He knew it, too.

Despite that, he seemed determined to rattle her if he could.

"A friend of Larry Marcacelli's?" He almost laughed, then lowered his eyes to her, exhaling a cloud of gray smoke. "Larry always said I wouldn't take him in,

and he was right." A sick little laugh. "Imagine that, Carrie, one of the biggest drug dealers on the East Coast and he drops dead of a heart attack. Kind of funny, don't you think?"

She wouldn't answer that. Instead she turned sharply away and started up the walkway as people were leaving the funeral home.

"Must be a hell of way to live, Carrie Anne," he called after her, using a name few did. In fact, the only one who'd ever called her Carrie Anne had been her father—and the ex-husband who was being buried today. All the same she paused and turned around as he added, "Always having to look over your shoulder."

"Cigarettes can kill you, Officer Valari," Carrie replied sharply. "Haven't you read the Surgeon General's report?"

"I didn't think you were coming back," exclaimed Pamela, Wife Number Three, as she rushed to greet Carrie at the door. "Until the funeral, that is."

"I felt I had to." Carrie gave the woman a half smile. "He was the only husband I ever had."

"But you're still young! And so pretty! I'll bet you could have anyone you wanted!" Pamela laughed. "Though out there in California don't they say all the good men are gay?" She laughed again and turned to her sister, and then the two of them laughed.

Carrie just smiled, agreeing with them. She'd agree with anything they said. She hadn't come

to pay her last respects to Larry. She hadn't respected him in life, death was out of the question. She also hadn't come to say good-bye. She'd already done that: stood at the coffin and marveled over the dead form of a man she'd been to bed with. It astounded her; it really did. Vital, loving, gregarious Larry Marcelli.

Lying, cheating, womanizing, coke-snorting Larry. Ignoring his own advice: just trade in the stuff, Carrie Anne, but never use it.

Carrie had followed that advice, benefited enormously from it; pity Larry hadn't.

Last night when Aunt Minnie had shaken the jet stone into Carrie's hand she'd felt sick for a minute, then elated, then sick again. She hadn't told Minnie about the church, but she had told her about the woman coming out of the house with an enormous flashlight to scare their pursuer away:

"You two must be terrified," the old woman had said to them, flashlight aimed at the ground. Foghorns were sounding across the bay; sirens were wailing in the distance. "My goodness." She turned to look back at her house. In the sky behind it was a glow from the burning church three streets over.

"House fire," Ray said breathlessly.

"My goodness," she said again. She turned back to them as her dog, a little beagle, settled on its haunches near her feet. "Maybe

you two should come in and I'll call your parents. And maybe the police. Person should be ashamed of himself, frightening children like that."

The woman had a strange, quick way of saying things, then pausing as if waiting for approval or comment. From the two children standing in front of her she got neither. Both were too breathless and scared to speak.

"Well," the woman said, "let me get you something to drink. Milk? Cocoa? It's dark and late, and you shouldn't be out on a night like this, not alone."

"No, no—" That was Ray, advancing to the woman's right; Carrie saw his eyes fall to the dog. But it was doing nothing more than sitting, panting, perhaps happy to get some company even on "a night like this."

"Ray," Carrie had said, trying to stop him.

So did the old woman. "Now, lad, there's nothing to fear. You can stay out here if you like and I'll phone your parents—"

But Ray had already bolted off across the yard, through a hedge-row and onto the dirt road beyond. For a moment Carrie and the woman just stood and looked in his direction. The foghorns grew louder, answered by a fishing boat somewhere out in the bay, its horn lower, more plaintive. The wail of police cars cut across them all: loud, piercing, insistent.

Then quite dramatically they all stopped, it seemed all at once.

"And you, young miss? You going to run off like your young friend?"

"No," Carrie answered with some relief. "I think I'd like a glass of milk . . . ma'am."

Twenty years later, safe in the ladies' room at the funeral home, Caroline Drew pulled the jet stone from her pocket.

It was soft—she remembered that about it—and black, shaped like a flattened disc. She didn't know its geological name, but she thought it might be a piece of perfect dark quartz or onyx, polished so well it seemed to contain an internal black light. Twenty years ago the old woman, whose name Carrie had never learned, told her what it was.

"When my grandfather passed on in 1912, he had a collection. Oh, what a fine collection it was! I've sold many of the pieces, much to my dismay, but a few are left. These—" she had set the box on a small oval table in the dining room facing the fog-bound bay—"are arrowheads, Wampanoag, from this very area. They aren't worth a lot, which is why I still have them, and this—" she handed Carrie a gray, oval rock about the size of her fist—"is what they call a grinding stone. The Indian women would put their corn in a flat dish and grind it to a paste." She demonstrated, moving the stone against her palm in a circular motion.

"What's that one?" Carrie had asked, pointing to the black stone. It had been sitting in a corner of the square box.

"My grandfather was a whaler, child, sailed all over the world chasing the whales, blue whales and sperm. He had a hard life, but he saw a lot, he did." The old woman lifted the black stone gently from its corner, took Carrie's hand, and placed the stone in the center of her palm. "This is a jet stone. Feel how cold and smooth it is. My grandfather told me it was an Indian amulet, a kind of good luck charm." She frowned, her tiny, elfin face assuming a hundred little wrinkles. "Because that's all it can do, bring good fortune—prosperity, wealth, even power—but only if—" She stopped rather shortly, then almost hesitantly said, "It belonged to a chief in some South American tribe. I don't remember too much about it, just—" She took the stone from Carrie's hand and frowned, turning it over as she did. She squinted at it, then at Carrie.

"You and that little boy, what exactly were you two up to tonight?"

It had been too easy for Carrie to lie. "We were just walking along the river. We knew it was kind of late and . . . and then this guy starts following us, so we ran this way trying to lose him."

The woman's eyes fell back to the stone. "It always brings its owner good fortune, child, but how it does is what makes it so disturbing and why I have always left it—" she put it back into the box very carefully, almost reverently—"right here."

"How does it . . ." Carrie

echoed just as the woman's teakettle started to whistle. That was good. She wanted the old woman to leave the room because the moment she did, Carrie was going to be gone, too.

There was a sudden cry outside the ladies' room, enough to startle her and jar her back to the present.

Carrie clenched the jet stone tightly in her fist, her mind racing back and forth in time. Last night when she'd told Aunt Minnie this part of the story, Minnie's response had been, "So an old woman in the house at the end of the beach—out by the jetty on a foggy night, when? In September of 1977, and after some mysterious person chased you and Ray, she gave you this?"

"No. She never gave it to me. She went to turn her teakettle off. I took it." Carrie was able to return her aunt's stare. "I just took it, Min. I slipped out the door and walked—no, I ran home. I was scared."

"You stole it."

"I told you, didn't I? Ray and I did bad things."

"But whatever for?" Minnie was still frowning, but Carrie could detect more in her voice, something icy and hard and surprisingly intolerant.

"I don't know," Carrie said. "Maybe because of what she told me before she went to get her tea. She said it could only bring good fortune, but it was how it worked that was disturbing."

Suddenly Carrie realized that her voice sounded so childlike, so

weak—but why? Was she simply pleading for her aunt to listen?

Or to care?

“How does that explain why you stole it?” Minerva Drew demanded. “And why someone chased you down the river and might have done God knows what to you and Ray Willett? Does it explain why you buried it in that old metal box your father found?”

“Yes,” Carrie answered. “The woman . . . she said the jet stone . . .” For a final time Carrie went back to 1977:

The old woman’s voice was so low and clear it was as if she were there in the room with them.

“ . . . can only make more of what a person already is. It makes those who are good better, and those who are evil, well . . .” Her eyes searched for, caught hold of, young Carrie Drew’s eyes. “Either way you’ll have wealth and prosperity, through fair means or foul. But it’s a terrible risk to take, my child. And a foolish old superstition, a sailor’s tale, I’m afraid. Especially the rest. I shouldn’t be telling a child.”

“It brings wealth and prosperity? It makes those who are good —” Carrie stopped and stared at the old woman. Yes, she was nothing more than a foolish old woman, and Carrie was a stupid and gullible child, to be listening to this nonsense, taking it seriously.

But all the same Carrie whispered, “Especially the rest?”

“Yes,” the woman whispered her reply. “Because in order for it to happen—for the jet stone to work its magic—it has to be buried.”

“Buried? That’s all?”

“Yes, child,” the woman whispered. “Buried with the dead.”

“Oh, she apologized,” she told Minnie last night, “for scaring me. She could see that she had. She tried to make light of it and said she was a silly old woman who should know better. Then she crossed herself, like this.” Carrie imitated the gesture.

“With the dead?” Aunt Minnie asked. Her hand went to her neck, then her collar, fidgeted with one shirt cuff, then the other. “Is that why you put it in a box and buried it in the ground where your dead pets were?” Her face was wild with scorn. “If you were twenty years younger I’d slap your bottom and send you to bed! The woman you talked to that night was Sophie O’Hanrahan, a recluse and a senile old fool who had nothing better to do than frighten gullible little children. What did you think? That if you buried that thing you’d become what—what? Rich? Powerful? Well, it happened, didn’t it? But not because some filthy rock was buried in the ground with your dead pets!”

So saying, Minerva Drew plucked the jet stone from her niece’s hand and threw it across the room.

“Aunt Minnie?”

“I know where it all comes from, Caroline. I always did. I

knew about you and Ray and the gang you ran with. I also know how the wonderful Larry Marcelli set you up in California. I also know I'm forced to accept charity from you whether I like it or not because I have no choice, that I have to accept the police coming here talking to me, because they do, Carrie, to ask about you and Larry. But I have to tell them I don't know anything. And I'm thankful for that because I don't want to know anything."

"Min?"

She was shaking but couldn't approach Minnie even as she said, "But worst of all, Carrie, is knowing that the one thing I could have done, twenty years ago, I didn't. If I hadn't been so cowardly, if I'd kept my hand on your shoulder, yes, maybe things would have turned out differently. And if only I'd not gone home—and told my first lie about you."

"Lie?"

"I told the police you were in bed asleep the night the church on Melrose Avenue burned down."

"Hello, Larry," Carrie whispered as she stood beside his coffin. He did look very good, quite

splendid really, in his dark gray Italian suit and expensive, hand-made silk tie. Death agreed with him. "And goodbye." She leaned over just slightly to touch his chest. Wife Number Four and her small party—her mother, brother, some friends—were across the room watching her. Everyone had gone but them. The funeral director was in the door, waiting to close the coffin.

So she moved, keeping her back to them, and looked over her shoulder. They couldn't see . . .

That the jet stone was between her fingers as she touched Larry and pushed it into his jacket pocket. The stone was small, flat, smooth; it made no bulge.

Carrie remembered what the old woman had said: "... can only make more of what a person already is. It makes those who are good better, and those who are evil, well . . ."

She stepped back, pretending to admire the flowers around the coffin, and remembered the rest, whispering the words as she did.

"Either way you'll have wealth and prosperity, through fair means or foul . . ."

She paused, then added, "This time make it happen the other way, Larry."

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Historians have long pondered why Muhamed, the Sultan of Swatoom, changed. For years he was famed throughout the Muslim world as a most enlightened ruler. Then, overnight, he became suspicious, trusting no one and behaving like a true despot. The drastic shift in his personality resulted from a murder in the mosque, a murder that took place—quite literally—behind his back.

Until that time the sultan was very democratic with his thousand and one servants. (He preferred to regard them as associates.) Five were his favorites, men whom he permitted to be addressed by the exalted title of “sahib.” He himself called them by their first names—Abdul, Babul, Cabul, Dadul, and Emdul—rather than by their last names—Kamarik, Lalarik, Mubarik, Navarik, and Omarik.

The Sultan of Swatoom had personally selected the five, one from each of his provinces of Pajarum, Qatum, Rubarum, Sagalum, and Tarabum. Each had been given special training for a position in the palace: an archivist (for the sultan desired that his deeds be recorded for posterity); a barber (for admittedly the sultan was vain about his personal appearance); a counselor (for advice on diplomatic and domestic matters); a deputy of inner chambers (to administer and regulate details within the palace); and a eunuch (to rule scrupulously over his harem of five hundred ravishing young women).

Thus time went pleasantly and peacefully by until that fateful evening. It was in the Islamic year 207, in the month of Ramadan. The sultan invited his trusted five to *maghrib*, the evening prayers, in the mosque. As the sun set in the west, the sultan entered the mosque and faced eastward toward Mecca. The five formed a north-south line five paces behind him and unrolled their prayer rugs of yellow, green, blue, brown, and saffron. The sultan prostrated himself, and his men did likewise.

The sultan finished reciting the customary *fattiha* and exclaimed, “*Allahu Akbar!*” The prayers were over. He rose and turned to his favorite servants. One was dead, a long-bladed knife embedded to the hilt in his side! He’d evidently died instantly, without a sound. The mosque was guarded by faithful janissaries outside. No stranger could have entered. The killer was one of the other four men.

(1) In addition to the man in the middle of the row, the servants included Emdul, Sahib Kamarik, the man from Pajarum, and the one with the green prayer rug.

(2) The counselor knelt with the man on the saffron rug on his immediate left and the man from Tarabum on his immediate right. They did not include Sahib Navarik.

(3) Sahib Lalarik prayed adjacent to Abdul and on his left. The other three servants included the man from Qatum, the eunuch, and the one with the yellow prayer rug.

(4) The man from Sagalum had Cabul on his immediate right and the man with the blue prayer rug on his immediate left.

(5) Sahib Navarik was just south of the man with the green rug. Neither of them was killed.

(6) Sahib Omarik knelt between the royal barber and Dadul, with the latter on his left.

(7) Babul was just south of Sahib Mubarik and just north of the deputy of inner chambers.

As the horrifying intrigue among his favorites became apparent to the sultan, he summoned forward his faithful old archivist, the one he was certain was innocent—the elderly, white-bearded old man was too feeble and arthritic to have thrown the fatal knife.

“Archivist,” said the sultan sternly, “what know ye of this affair?”

The old man bowed his head in deference. “Sire, only this can I say with certainty. As I knelt at *maghrib*, I heard the knife whistle over my head, though I knew not at the time what it was.”

Babul declared, “As Allah is the True Prophet, I am innocent!”

The deputy of inner chambers quickly added, “As am I, my lord.”

“You!” thundered the Sultan of Swatoom, leveling his finger at one of the five. “You have betrayed my trust. And in the mosque! And during Ramadan! Nevermore will I treat my servants as anything but—servants!”

He called to the janissaries outside the mosque, ordering them to conduct the killer to the sharp scimitar of the royal executioner.

Who killed whom inside the sacred area of the mosque?

See page 138 for the solution to the November puzzle.

ELEPHANT DREAMS

Pamela Blackwood



It was nothing but a handkerchief.

The only one he owned and, even before the thing had happened on Sunday, not anywhere near white any more although his wife washed it out every Saturday night. The rest of his clothes, stiff with soot and dirt, received no more washings than he did, and why should they? In and around the chimneys of London all day, what square inch of him would stay clean after sunrise?

The handkerchief was a different matter. It had been a present from her to him for their fifth anniversary and stayed in his pocket. "For wiping the soot from your eyes," she had said, holding it open like a flag between her thumbs and forefingers. "And only that. And your lips," she added, pressing the fine linen to her mouth and then to his



and then pressing her body to his until he could do nothing but what nature intended. He would think of that when he pulled out the handkerchief to give his face a good dusting or wipe a bit of ale from his chin. His eyes would go soft, and his tavern companions would think him daft, smiling and squeezing a bit of dirty linen before replacing it gently, like a fine jewel, in the pocket of his filthy coat.

That was before, every day before last Sunday morning, before he'd taken out the handkerchief and coughed into it and gone cold with horror. The thing had spent the rest of the week stuffed in his pants pocket. He could not bring himself to pull it out, even to staunch the flow of blood when he'd cut himself against a bent door hinge. He now coughed into the crook of his coat sleeve; nothing to see there, it was black even under the layers of soot and grime.

But now, now there was this boy. In better days, the boy's screams would have bounced off his ears like so many flying cobblestones. His wasn't a heart of brick, but it was just that way with the younger ones. They screamed, they whimpered, then they learned. It was a hard life, he knew that. He had lived it himself, sold by his parents to a master sweep at the age of six. He had cried, he had had flames and pins put to his heels, had even been stuck in a flue from sunup to noon. He had lived, and so would this one. But for now the screams were breaking his ears and riding all round on his conscience.

The child's tears were sliding off his cheeks and leaving flesh-colored trails down his sooty chest. Jack knelt down in front of him and wiped his face, first with his curled-up fist, then with the flats of his fingers. When the tears kept coming, there was nothing to do but to pull out the handkerchief.

He dabbed at the boy's cheeks, ignoring the rust-colored flecks on the cloth. "Look here, Ned," he said and pointed behind the draped fireplace. He lifted the blanket and eased the tiny boy inward. "Just look up there. It's not such a long one this time, and straight up, no crinkum-crankum. You'll not get stuck again this morning, sure. See, it's no longer than from here to there." He pointed to a table of bric-a-brac across the parlor. "You ever seen so many elephants as that, Ned? Why, it's a whole bloody herd, right there on that tabletop."

The child stepped out from under the flue and looked for the herd of elephants. Seeing them there, all sizes and colors, some running and some trumpeting, he forgot, for a moment, to wail. Jack took advantage of his fascination and gently slid the sooty stocking cap over his head. "You'll be all up in a flash, Ned. You'll see." Rising, he nodded toward the other apprentice. "Get him started good, Jamey. Afterward, the two of you can take turns on the upstairs bedrooms. Give him the master's, I seen another batch of them trinkets up there. And Albert . . ." Jack coughed into his sleeve and then addressed the youth slouching on the other side of the fireplace holding a scraper and

brush. "If anything happens with him like what happened at the last place—" he raised his voice over the child's renewed cries "—you'll come and get me straightaway. I'll be down in the kitchen."

"Yes, sir," Albert answered, not bothering to erase the half-smirk from his face. "We don't want the little bugger wasting no more of our valuable time, do we? Here." He thrust the scraper and brush into the sobbing child's hands and pushed him back under the flue. "Me and Jamey'll take care of him good, sir. You take a rest now, why don't you?"

"I don't—" Jack started and then was consumed by such a fit of coughing that he could not express his opinion that no journeyman half his age could tell him when to take and when not to take a rest. He'd sack the cheeky devil, but then who would help him train the future apprentices?

The thought that he had not much future left ran through his mind, and then, right after, as had happened since the droplets on the handkerchief, the flames of Hell caught at his mind and nearly took away what meager breath he had left.

"Easy on him," he said hoarsely, seeing Jamey pull a pin out of the fabric of his breeches. "You talk him up first, Jamey. Before you do any sticking. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," the child answered over the cries of his fellow apprentice. "Me and Albert'll get him going good and steady for you."

Jack waited until he heard the soft scraping of metal on brick intermingled with the muffled sobs and then headed for the back stairs. He had smelled bread baking earlier, and a cup of coffee might go some way toward easing the demon in his chest.

He took the steps slowly, listening for the boy, and heard him cry out once, almost certainly a victim of Jamey's sadistic encouragement. Not many young ones took more than one good poking to get them going smooth. Jack had nothing to do with holding fire to his boys' feet and never had. But a good pinprick, why, they barely felt that, he told himself. He waited a second more on the last step down and heard another cry. He told himself it was more in anger than fear and hoped Christ and the devil weren't listening, and stepped into the kitchen.

"When will you be back, then?" the cook asked without preamble. "My roast'll be done by noon, and then we can put the fire out and let it cool a bit before that screaming urchin of yours goes up. You'll be back this afternoon?"

"My boys will be," Jack said and settled on the bench in front of the fire. "I'll be at the alehouse warming myself."

"And leaving those babies to do the work," the cook said, and taking a coffeepot from the hearth, she poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Jack. "How old is that one I heard screaming? He sounded no bigger than this one here." She tapped the head of a small boy who



sat in front of the fire turning the roast on a spit. "How old, then? Four or five, to scream like that?"

"He's old enough to work," Jack said testily. Curse the woman, she was voicing what his conscience had been stabbing him with all morning. "His father said he was seven going on eight."

"That one? If he's seven, I'm seventeen."

"And we know that's not so, don't we?" Jack said and smiled. "The boy's screaming because he got stuck at the last place. Went halfway up fairly smooth and then got jammed in smart. Jamey had to go up and yank him down by the ankles. Didn't hurt him a bit, just scared him. It won't be happening again, not today. I greased him, see. Drippings from the lady's greasebucket. Poured it all over him."

"Cooled down, I hope," the cook said and pulled a pan of biscuits from the iron oven next to the fireplace. "Poor little mite."

"How about a couple of those for a poor old sick man," Jack asked.

"Better sick than dead," the cook said, and the turning boy looked up at Jack and the serving girl peeling potatoes in the corner looked over at him and he wondered if he had the look already, the bright red cheeks and bright eyes of consumption.

It was a stark rudeness. The confounded woman had been almost flip-pant about it. Jack suppressed what, no doubt, would have turned into a frenzy of coughing and satisfied himself with a shallow hack accompanied by a strangling sound in his throat. When the cook handed him two biscuits on a tin plate, he was able to produce something like a smile.

"It's not always the end, you know, dearie. There are things can be done."

"Of course it is," the miserable woman said and went about tending a cauldron hanging over the fire. "And I never answered to dearie in my life. My name's Tettie. Of course it's the end. What more is there after being dead? In this realm, anyway. Malinda," she addressed the servant girl in the corner. "These carrots are thick-covered with soot and Lord knows what else. You leave that vendor alone next time. No, there's nothing," she came back to her refrain.

"Well, I've heard of things," Jack said. Tettie's biscuits were as hard as she was. Not willing to risk the teeth he had left, he put the tin plate down and poured a little coffee on the stony sinkers to soften them up. "Why, just this week I heard of a treatment. You get yourself thirty garden snails and thirty earthworms, average size. Nick the snails and bruise them and cut the worms into bits and boil the lot in a quart of water. You strain that and there's something else you add, which I can't bring to mind, but you add it and you've got yourself a tea to fight it with. You take a quarter pint of it, warmed up, with a quarter pint of cow's milk, and there you are."

"A tea for the dead?" Tettie was unconvinced. "I'd like to see 'em drink it."

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"I'm not dead yet, am I?" Jack said fervently, wondering at the woman's gall. "And there's more still." He'd been soliciting cures since Sunday for "an uncle in the north." He burst on. "There's lots of ways you can fight it, sure. There's asses' milk, everybody knows that, and there's ground-ivy tea, and here's one a fishmonger told me about, a mix of crabs' eyes and burnt sponge and tar and wood lice and . . ." Jack strained to remember the rest. The animated talking was playing havoc with his lungs, and he coughed in spite of himself. "I know, and viper's flesh. And one other thing, which I can't remember, but—"

"Are you daft?" Tettie asked simply. "How are you getting the dead to take it? You going to stand the poor thing on her toes and pour it down her throat?"

Jack looked from Tettie to Malinda. "What are you talking about? Who the devil is 'her'?"

"You haven't heard, then," Tettie said and sat down with a bowl of vegetables on her lap. She held up a carrot, examined it, and shook her head. "'Course, why would you? Who would there be to tell you? The master's gone out, and that sorry girl over there's been at her dingy potatoes all morning, and I only just let you in and pointed where to go, didn't I? And it's not likely my mistress would be chatting with the likes of you."

"She wouldn't be that lucky today," Jack said, feeling the old flirtatious rogue stirring within him, for he was goodlooking to the ladies and young to boot, and hearty or had been until last Sunday morning. The cursed handkerchief, his death warrant, seemed to stir in his pocket, and he reached down and stuffed it in as far as it would go. The cook had dangled a bit of gossip, and he liked gossip. He could tell Molly over their supper tonight, and it would entertain her and distract him. "What is it, Tettie, that I haven't heard?"

"We've had a death in the house, that's what you haven't heard."

"A death and the master's gone out . . ."

"Oh, it's not one of them," Tettie said, wiping the carrots on her apron one at a time. "It's one of us. A housemaid by the name of Charlotte. They found her in the river this morning, fished her out and guess what they saw? Her throat was black and blue. Someone had closed his dirty great fingers around it and then tossed the poor thing into the Thames. She'd been done in right and proper and flung away like a rag. Malinda heard about it when she went out to get these vegetables at dawn."

"What a pity," Jack said and started on one of Tettie's biscuits. His rotten back tooth, which had been the biggest nuisance in his life before Sunday, sent a bolt of pain upward, and he squeezed his eyes shut against it. He swallowed the bite nearly whole and touched his fingers to his cheek: "Young girl, was she?"

"Not a day older than sixteen," Tettie said. "Tiny little thing and as





sweet a girl as you'd ever want to meet. And a lovely girl, too. Reminded me of a summer day, she did. The loveliest hair you ever seen, long and yellow and she kept it clean as morning. I don't know how he could have done it."

"Her lover, you mean," Jack said, and when he got no response, he looked up from sopping the coffee off his plate to see the cook and the girl sharing a glance. "'Cause that's always who's done it, you know. It's not likely a footpad would go to the pain of robbing and choking a serving girl."

"She didn't have no lover," Malinda said from her corner, and it was as if a she-devil had spoken. The girl looked out from under a curtain of frizzy auburn hair, and her voice was cold and certain. "Not what I'd call a lover, not that one—" She pressed her lips tight together, and Jack caught Tettie's shaking head from the corner of his eye and knew something was afoot. He took up the other biscuit, broke off a small bite, and gave it a try on the back left side of his mouth. He was already missing a goodly number of teeth in that quadrant, and the bread would take a full minute of gumming before it yielded. He had time to wait, he guessed. Both women had gone silent, and the room was filled with the sizzling of meat from the roasting boy's spit and the quiet crack of vegetables being rendered into pieces for the bubbling cauldron.

From atop the house, the climbing boy's call broke the silence. "All up," Jack repeated after the boy, and smiled to himself. "That's it, Ned. Good boy."

The room fell silent again, and Jack coughed once, muffling the violence of it in his coat sleeve. He took a drink of the coffee to soothe his throat, as if it were his throat vexing him instead of a great rotten hole growing in his lungs. In the damnable silence he could hear horses' hooves clomping on the cobblestones above them and a quick splash as Tettie emptied her apron contents into the cauldron and his own lungs bubbling and boiling and going toward rendering him a sunken shell of a man, suffocating him as if he were stuck in a chimney but this time with no master to pull him out. He could feel the lack of air already and took a deep breath and jumped a bit as Tettie broke the silence.

"Of course I said it was going to happen, didn't I?" She looked over at Malinda and back. "There was going to be a death among us. I saw it yesterday, plain and simple." Tettie looked toward the stairs and then, lowering her voice, leaned closer to Jack. "Last evening the master told me to send Charlotte to him, and I went and found her putting her mistress's bed back into service. She'd pulled it apart yesterday morning to treat it for vermin, and the drying time was up and she was setting it to rights. And the minute I stepped into the mistress's room a piece of coal flew right out of the fire, just like that, and it was shaped like a coffin. That can only mean one thing. There's go-



ing to be a death, I told Charlotte. Someone in this house is going to die, just as sure as a piece of coal shaped like a cradle means a birth. Charlotte just laughed and said how could I tell the difference? The piece looked as much like a cradle as a coffin, as they're both long and narrow." Tettie showed the shape with her hands. "But this one was longer," she finished authoritatively. "And I could tell the difference. But who'd have thought it'd be the poor child herself?"

"Why, anyone who—" Malinda said.

"Hush, girl," Tettie snapped and dipped her head toward Jack. "It's not like he's one of us, is it?"

"Well, it's not like he's one of them, neither."

"Like who?" Jack said, looking from Tettie to Malinda and back.

"Like nobody," Tettie said and leaned in so close to Jack that he could see right down the front of her dress. "Like more coffee, Mr. . . . ?"

"Jack."

"Mr. Jack?" Tettie asked, and Jack could swear, if he didn't suspect Tettie of being twice his age, that she was flirting with him.

"Just Jack," he said and smiled. It was a disarming smile, he knew, because he still had most of his front teeth and he hadn't any pox scars like poor Malinda, who clearly had been afflicted at some time. He winked as Tettie poured the coffee. Women, Molly had told him, found him quite appealing. He believed her on this without giving it much thought and decided to use his appeal to find out what it was that they didn't want him to know.

"Thank you, dearie."

"My name—"

"Is Tettie," he finished for her. "Sorry, but it's a habit of mine. An endearment, ain't it? No harm in that."

"My husband might think different," Tettie said. "When are those scamps of yours going to be through? They've only two flues to clean upstairs and both short and sweet."

"They'll be done in the twinkling of a bedpost," Jack said and left off his smile. He hadn't felt it beyond his teeth anyway, even if there hadn't been a Mr. Tettie. He was malingering, and he knew it and only trying to distract himself. Still, he'd get the rest of the news about the poor girl because Molly would ask all, and then he'd collect his ten-pence per flue and be on his way.

"Where was the poor thing from?" he asked, because it would be Molly's first concern. The information would be passed from her to her customers, who came not only for fish but for news.

"She was from Wapping, I believe," Tettie said. "Had an old mum there and a brother but not much further family."

"Seven months and it would have been more," Malinda piped in, and the cook silenced her with a glance.

"And she was a good girl, too, that one," Tettie continued. "Had just



been talking about buying her mum a present of some sort. I think she had her eye on a set of dishes, but it was a dream and nothing more. She hadn't been serving more than six months and made no more than that girl over there, who can't afford a clean frock or a clean tongue."

Malinda stuck hers out, and Tettie waved it away with her spoon.

"Why, I've been cooking for twenty-one years, and I can't have what I want, can I? It's all dreams for such as us and nothing more. A serving girl of six months has no more—"

"She told him last night is what happened," Malinda said in a rush. "He called for her, she told him she had a loaf in the oven, and he sent her off, and then, later on, he met her somewhere and done her in. I never even got to tell her goodbye. Nobody did, he sent her off so bloody fast. He didn't care to sire a bastard, so he choked her and threw her in the water and then come home for a couple of cocks if you please."

"You'll hush or I'll be sending you off, miss," Tettie said, glancing at the stairs once and then again. "You'll be costing us both our situations, and at my age I'll not be finding another one so quick."

"Might be safer," Malinda said and brought her bowl of cut potatoes over to add to Tettie's cauldron. "You're all right, ain't you, but what if he took a fancy to me like he done to her . . ."

"His eyesight's not failing, that much I know," Tettie responded with what Jack considered unnecessary cruelty. He smiled at the housemaid, but she ignored him and went back to her corner.

"It wasn't his eyes he was out to satisfy, was it?" the girl said and sat, leaning back on the stone wall behind her bench.

"You needn't sit," Tettie said and pointed up the stairs with her spoon. "They'll be plenty to do cleaning up soot along with your regular duties and Charlotte's. Go along up to the parlor and then the bedrooms and get the fires going. And keep to yourself."

"Yes, mum," the girl said and pulled her skirts out to each side in an exaggerated curtsy. "May I have a biscuit before I go, mum?"

"Come on, then," Tettie said and motioning to Jack for his cup and plate, she poured the girl a swallow of coffee and dropped a biscuit on the plate for her. "I don't know why I keep on a sauce-box like that," she said as she handed Malinda the plate. "Just look at her. Smiling and fawning like a sinning vicar one minute and likely stabbing me in the back the next."

"I don't know either," Jack said, irritated that his charm had fallen on barren ground with the girl. "Same reason I keep my boys, I guess. They're better than what might replace 'em, and why waste the training?"

"'Course we'll have to train someone new anyway to replace poor Charlotte."

"You and him both," Malinda said, swallowing half the biscuit and

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washing it down with coffee. Upstairs the front door opened and shut. Malinda looked up to where heavy footsteps were crossing above them and lowered her voice. "Of course his training'll be a sight quicker than yours. And easier." She wiped her mouth with her hand. "Why, his training you can get lying down, can't you? And quicker than a breath . . ."

"Hush, girl," Tettie said urgently because there was a clatter of footsteps coming down the stairs to the kitchen. When it was no more than Jamey and Ned, finished with their work and come to be collected by their master, she heaved a sigh of relief and aimed her spoon at the girl. "You'll keep your tongue in your head from now on. You know and I know what's happened, as does every servant in this place, but it don't make a difference that we know. It's not like they'd listen to a cook or a housemaid; but we'd all be turned out just the same and then where'd we be? All we can do is pray for Charlotte and keep our mouths shut tight. You remember that, missy."

"I never answered to missy in my life," the girl spouted in one final burst of cheek and then fetched her broom from the corner cupboard and started for the stairs.

"How about moving your little clergymen," she called over her shoulder to Jack; and he motioned for Jamey and Ned to come over and join him. He wanted to question Ned about his time up the flues, but there was something brewing larger than gossip in Tettie's kitchen and he didn't need to be hit over the head to get it. He waited while Tettie clucked over the young ones, asking them to park their bags of soot in one corner and take a place on the bench next to Jack while she fixed them each a biscuit.

He protested once when he saw the woman give a smear of butter to each biscuit where he had had none, but she silenced him with talk about their innocence and need. He couldn't disagree, so he sat silently while the boys ate and fished in his brain for a way to make Tettie say outright what she'd been dancing around all morning.

She'd been talking about murder.

"Does the master do the training, then?" he finally asked to jar the woman back to the subject. She shot him a glance and, smearing another biscuit with butter, broke it in half and gave each boy a piece.

"I train the help," she said, and picking up the two stocking caps from where the boys had dropped them, she tossed them onto Jack's lap. "I'll be sweeping for a week after you."

"It's just that the girl said the master'd be doing—"

"The girl's as foolish as a trout. She's too young to know what the likes of us know, and if she keeps that tongue wagging, she'll buy herself more trouble than she knows about. Some things are set, they don't change and it's no use thinking they do."

"What do you mean, Tettie?" Jack asked, smoothing the stocking caps



in his lap. He suspected the boys of eating their biscuits in tiny bites to prolong their idleness, but for once he didn't care. He'd lost some of his love of money in the last week and he reckoned the boys could do with a rest, and he hoped God noticed this and remembered later on.

And Tettie was talking about murder.

"You know sure and well what I mean, and you've known all along." She lowered her voice and glanced at the stairs. "They can do one of us in anytime, can't they? Who's going to believe it or care? He fancied the girl, and she fancied a better life. She told me she was going to be an actress. Be on Drury Lane, she was, and I could come and see her, and she'd get me the best seat in the house. Fancy that." Tettie shook her head, gave her bubbling stew a quick stir, and turned back to Jack. "She thought she could find her way up in the world, but she just found herself three months gone." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and Jack leaned in closer to hear. "Malinda was dead on right about it. Charlotte told him last night about her condition, and that was the end of her. I never seen her again after I sent her to him, that's how quick he sacked her. And paid her, no doubt, to keep away from him and leave him out of it. Paid her like a common whore."

"You can't know that, can you?" Jack said. "Unless the girl showed you the money in her hand."

"I can know there was five pounds, give or take a quid, gone from the master's bedroom. He keeps a pitcher by the bedside, calls it his cock money. Fitting, ain't it? Anyway, I went up to get the pitcher this morning since your boys was going up there, and the lot of it was gone. And it was there yesterday, I seen it when I was dusting."

"Maybe he used it for cocks," Jack said, vexed at the woman's casual assumption that his boys were thieves. "You can't know that, how he used it."

"Oh, I know." Tettie nodded her head with authority. "Trouble is, who would care other than her poor old mum?"

"Your mistress, I should think," Jack said and folded the stocking caps across his knees. The woman's story had emptied his mind of his own trouble, at least for a while. When Albert, his journeyman, came down to the kitchen to round up the young ones, Jack told him to take the boys and wait in the street. He would be out in a minute, he said, and then he turned his mind back to Tettie who, now started, ranted on and on.

"They met after dark is what happened. He took her out somewhere for a nice late supper and followed it with a stroll along the Thames and then, in some dark spot where nobody was looking, *titch* . . ." Tettie made a strangling motion with her hands. "He done her in, took back his money, and threw her in the river. And then came home about ten as calm as you please and said he was going back out to the cockfights. Packed a sack with his birds, said he was going up for his cock money, and left. Wasn't home till well past midnight with an



empty sack and a roomful of people who'll say he spent the evening betting on cocks. Oh, he done it all right, even if he thinks we're too beef-witted to put it together. How much do I owe you?"

"Fifty pence," Jack said. "Five flues at tenpence per flue and Albert'll collect the rest when the boys come back this afternoon for this one in here."

"I'll be right back with it," Tettie said. She crossed the room, then turned at the foot of the stairs and shook her finger at Jack. "Don't you repeat a thing I've said. It's not like there's anything can be done. Not us against them."

She went up the stairs, and Jack stretched his hands to the fire for one last warming and wondered if it was the same in the land of the dead, if there were two types of angels, the wealthy and all the rest who served on earth and would serve in heaven. He felt a sadness for the tiny actress who had looked like summer and for Ned and Jamey who would likely turn out no better than him and even for Albert, sadistic bastard that he was. They would all die sooner or later, with no more than gin and the poor's hole to follow and some even sooner than later, his chest told him, for he was wracked by a series of coughs that bounced the stocking caps to the floor and made him rise to his feet and bend in an effort to draw in air. When Tettie returned, he was sitting again, catching his breath. She walked over to where he sat, picked up the caps, and tossed them back into his lap.

"Those rascals of yours have spread soot up and down the stairs. I'll be sweeping it for a fortnight. Here." She thrust her closed fist at him. "As you said, I'll not pay for this one here until your boys are back and have done it. I can't be spending carelessly, and how do I know they'll even be back? And they'll have to do a smart job and not track any more—are you listening to me?"

Jack nodded as if he were and continued to smooth the stocking caps against his thighs. Even if his lungs were bad, his eyes were as sharp as ever. He brushed at Ned's cap to shake some of the soot away and looked closer.

"Are you going to take this or not?" Tettie rattled the money in her hand. "Or have you gone plain daft? Here, take it, I've got all my work to do plus seeing to Charlotte's, and you've put me behind already. Here," she repeated but with less punch because she was becoming distracted with watching Jack's hands on the stocking cap. "Lord, bless me," she said minutes later and the fist, which she had been holding up without realizing it, fell to her side with a penny escaping and rattling to the floor. "Bless me," she breathed again and then sat heavily on the bench next to Jack.

For five good minutes she sat while Jack examined his find. After he had gone over every inch of the cap, he just as carefully restored it to normal, even brushing soot from his hands back onto the knitted



fabric. Tettie watched the whole business, mute and sometimes forgetting to breathe. When Jack finally turned to her, she placed a hand over her chest and filled her lungs in one greedy gasp.

"Take a good breath, Tettie," he said, "and steady your hands as well. I think I need to speak with your master. It seems he owes for more than chimneys."

"You're not going to show the master . . . you can't . . ." she said and stood, still staring at the remarkable thing in Jack's hands. "There's nothing can be done for it."

"Go bring Ned in," Jack said and stood up himself. "I'll take my pay now. And then you tell your master he's got a couple of guests."

"Here's the one you asked for," Tettie said moments later and thrust Ned in his direction. They were standing in the entrance hall, just outside the parlor door. "What should I tell those other two? I don't want them standing out front half the morning."

"We'll not be here half the morning," Jack said, and kneeling down, he pulled the stocking cap back over Ned's face. "Tell 'em to go up the street and find some business and we'll catch up to 'em later. And then send in your master. What's his name, anyway?"

"Townley," Tettie said and disappeared.

"Do I have to do it again?" Ned asked and rubbed at the eyeholes of the stocking cap. "'Cause we already done the parlor one."

"I know, Ned," Jack said and pulled out the handkerchief to dab at the boy's eyes. The bloody flecks, now recolored and diffused with the child's earlier tears, gave Jack a crazy feeling of power. He was dying; what did he have to fear? "You don't have to go up again, lad. We're doing a different sort of housecleaning this time. You just stay by me, all right?"

The boy nodded and Jack opened the door to the parlor.

"Morning, sir," he said when the master of the house appeared a quarter hour later. Jack looked at the man's hands and then into his face. "Beautiful morning, ain't it? For some of us, that is. Give your respects to Mr. Townley, Ned."

"Morning, sir." The child became parrotlike. "Beautiful morning."

"What do you want?" Townley asked and strolled over to the fireplace. "You've finished your work, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir, we have. My boys have done—"

"If it's your pay you want, Mrs. Haycraft should have seen to that. Go down to the kitchen and collect it from her."

"Truth is, my lord, it's not pay we're after. I just asked to have a word with you on a certain matter is all."

"Is that right?" Townley allowed, and taking a cigarette from a gilded box on the fireplace mantel, he held it briefly to the fire. "Can I of—"

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fer you one?" he held the lighted stick in the air. "Or the boy? Since this is a social call, I suppose I should present all the amenities. Have a seat here." He gestured toward a straight-backed chair on the other side of the fireplace. "I suppose the boy can stand, or should I find him a gout stool as well?"

"He's fine, Mr. Townley," Jack said and watched the man flick a bit of lint from the needle-point seat of a chair opposite his and then sit. He leaned back at once, crossed his legs, and laid his arms on the wooden chair arms.

"I suppose I should offer you a drink as well. Since this is a social call." He smiled tightly and drew on the cigarette, tapping the ashes onto the fireplace hearth. "What can I get you, Mr. . . .?"

"Jack's enough. I don't fancy a smoke or a drink, sir. However, it would be a kindness if you could keep that smoke out of my boy's face." The man was blowing it directly at Ned. "It gets trapped behind his cap, see." Jack tapped on the stocking cap to direct the man's eyes to it. "And he can't breathe so good."

"I do beg your pardon, Jack," Townley said and moved his cigarette from one hand to the other. "Because, of course, the boy's never in smoke, is he? What the hell do you want? I've got better things to do than listen to some lily-white tell me where I can and cannot blow smoke in my own house."

"Of course you do, guv'ner. The thing is, I wanted to talk to you about the cockfights. I heard you went out to one last night and took a sack of your own birds along. You raise cocks, then, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I've nearly two dozen."

"And they'd be fine birds, would they? They win you a nice sum last night?"

"I did well enough," Townley said, looking at the end of his cigarette. "What interest or business is it of yours?"

"I never turn down a way to make a spare shilling or two. When your cook told me you bet on the cocks and even raised your own birds, I couldn't see no harm in having a word with you about it. Maybe getting a tip on a problem for a friend of mine."

"You a betting man, are you?"

Jack smiled and pulled Ned up against him. "I do like to take a chance now and again, guv'ner. Not too many, mind, but once in a while I think it stirs a man's gumption to take a risk. I think I might take you up on that drink after all, sir."

"Very well." Townley left the room and Jack sat down in the chair by the fireplace and pulled Ned in front of him.

"I've hit his soft spot, Ned. And with any luck, I plan to hit a softer spot still."

The boy began tugging at the stocking cap. "Can I take it off now?"

"No, Ned, not yet. You just leave it alone and stand still while I'm



talking to Mr. Townley, and we'll see what happens, won't we? Quiet now," he added as the man came back in carrying two glasses of wine.

"I trust canary will be to your liking." He bent and gave the glass to Jack and reoccupied the chair across from him.

"It's fine, guv'ner, fine. It'll ease my chest a bit, I hope."

"We all hope for that," Townley said solemnly, and Jack, who was not the most educated man in the world but who knew something about people, saw the smirk behind the statement and knew the man's game at once. It was a fling, this, having drinks in the parlor with a dirty sweep and his boy and talking cocks. He'd tell it at the coffee-house and have his friends in stitches. Jack looked at the man, reclining in his chair and sipping his drink and pegging them as worthless clods with his downturned mouth and amused eyes. Suddenly the sweep began enjoying himself. He pushed on Ned's shoulders.

"Have a seat, Ned, but mind you, don't shake off any soot."

Townley waved his hand in the air and shook his head gallantly.

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least. That's why I keep help."

"You're keeping a little less, I hear," Jack said because he couldn't stop himself. He took a drink to curb his tongue because he wanted to string it out, wanted to make Townley dance and suffer like the poor cocks he was so fond of watching. He pulled a sad face and shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear about that, sir. Tragic. And a murder it was."

Townley took a drink and balanced the glass on his knee. "That's what they say. I thought you wanted to talk about cocks."

"That I do, sir." Jack laid one hand on Ned's head and began to pat him gently. "If you don't mind my asking, where was this match you got lucky at last night? Royal Cockpit, was it? Or the Hound and Whistle?"

"Nowhere you've likely been," Townley said, looking into his drink. "It was a tavern off the Strand. Grossley's, I believe."

"New to it, are you?" Jack asked. With infinite care he began to examine Ned's cap, studying the fiber as if looking for the most minute vermin.

"Yes, somewhat," Townley said and twisted in his chair, uncrossing his legs and recrossing them on the other side. "I'm sure a man like yourself wouldn't have knowledge of it."

"You're right about that, guv'ner. Down by the river, was it?"

"Close enough."

"Close enough for what, sir?"

Townley turned carefully and placed his drink on a small table beside him, never taking his eyes off the sweep and his boy. Leaning back in his chair, he took a drag on the cigarette, tapped the ashes to the hearth, and blew the smoke to one side. Jack felt a gripping in his chest and coughed briefly, stifling the sensation with every bit of pluck he had. If they'd been cocks, he'd have been a street bird and

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Townley a prize rooster, raised on white bread steeped in drink, but even street birds could hide their wounds and fight for a while. He raised his eyebrows, inviting Townley's response to his question.

"Close enough for me to call it close to the river. What else?"

"I was just asking, sir. Look at that," Jack said to himself and swept a bit of imaginary debris from Ned's cap. "I was only wondering if you seen anything of that poor girl they pulled from the river this morning is all. Of course you didn't. You was gaming. Anyway, here's what I wanted to ask. You raise cocks, I figure you know all the ways of doing them justice. I know of a young one, cock that is, that's been grievous wounded, and I'd like to know how to get him back to snuff. To fighting strength, you see, so my friend can put him in a bout, a Welsh main, maybe, if he's strong enough. I'll be damned." Slowly Jack lifted a long blonde hair from Ned's cap and laid it across his knee. "If you know anything of that type of thing, sir." He nodded and smiled with his best charm.

It was lost on Townley. The man's face had become an inscrutable mask. He watched as Jack lifted another hair, passed it between his fingertips, and laid it down next to the first one.

"Of course I know something of it. What is it, exactly, that you want to know? I do have other business."

"Of course you do, sir. It's his flank, you see. He took a thrashing in his last victory, and he's not been right since. A gouge is what he's got. Right shoulder got caught by a spur. What do you say for that?" Jack's hands were busy again, turning Ned's head this way and that, finding a third golden strand and lifting it straight up with both hands.

"If you really knew cocks," Townley said, no longer bothering to hide the contempt in his voice, "you'd know that wounds such as that are treated with warm urine. It's obvious you're only here to play a stupid game with me. What amazes me is that you thought the effort would succeed in any way." Townley reached for his glass and lifted it carelessly to his lips. Instead of emptying it, as Jack had hoped, he merely took a sip and then returned it to the table beside him. His vexation had been spent in three sentences. He sat now, legs crossed and elbows on his chair, gazing at Jack from on high. The cigarette between his fingers was still as a stump, only the smoke curling up in a wisp of motion.

Jack smiled again and plucked the fourth and final strand from the boy's stocking cap. He tidied the yellow collection lying across his knee and looked Townley in the eye.

"You're right about one thing, guv'nor. I don't know a bloody thing about cocks and even less about those that find it a sport to watch 'em tear each other to bits. I never had much use for the sport or the spectators. I was just wondering if your missus did. Had any use for the spectators, that is. For one particular spectator, you see. Why, for you, sire."



Townley said nothing for a moment, simply sat and smoked and stared at Jack as though he were a nonsense riddle. His voice, when he finally spoke, was barely audible.

"No one is going to believe you. You're only a sweep, for God's sake. A man who uses tiny boys to do his work for him. A man who lets tiny boys die doing his work for him."

Jack swallowed his bile and shook his head. "I don't need no one to believe me, Mr. Townley. I only need to show Mrs. Townley what a dirty chimney she's got in her household. How she needs to get onto the help to get the chimneys swept more. To keep the soot and other things, like dead girl's hair, swept out. Because they can get awfully dirty, sir, as you can see. Why sometimes, they can even get completely blocked up, so there's—"

"What do you want?" Townley said, uncrossing his legs. He sighed, looked around the room from corner to corner and then back at Jack. He was ready to end the annoyance, dispatch the dirty trouble in his parlor with a few shillings and be on with his day. Once more Jack choked back his anger. He wanted to be in control, to see the man squirm and beg. Or at least squirm.

"Oh, I don't want a thing for myself, sir. You see, the state I'm in right now, I've mostly lost my taste for money. It's too late for me, just like it's too late for poor Charlotte, but there's another lot coming up after us who might have a taste for something better than soot. See what I mean, guv'ner?"

"I'll ask you again," Townley said from behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. "What do you want? What's your price?"

"And I'll tell you again. There's nothing you can give me that would make me a happy man." Jack took out his handkerchief and shook it to its full length. "You don't know this and won't care but this cloth here's changed a few things for me."

"Is that so," Townley said blandly.

"I can't use money where I'll likely be going, so it's no good offering me any. But," Jack patted Ned on the shoulders and then tugged on his armpits until the boy stood, "I noticed you had an interest in the welfare of my boy here. At least I think that's what you meant when you said tiny boys was being killed by sweeps. Is that what you meant, sire?" Townley said nothing, nursing his cigarette and glancing with increasing frequency at the parlor door. "Is that what you meant, my lord?"

"Yes, yes," the rich man barked and reached inside his coat to pull out a brown leather purse. "How much?"

"How much you got there, guv'ner?"

Townley laughed. "I should have seen that coming." He shook a collection of coins into his palm and counted it. "Two five-guineas, four shillings, and a half-crown. Will that be enough for you, Jack?" Eyes



locked on the sweep he tilted his palm until the coins slid off and jingled onto the floor, then tossed the purse down as well. "There, have it all. Will that do, or is there anything else?" He leaned back, with great majesty, and crossed his arms.

"Gather that up, Ned," Jack said softly to the boy after protecting the blonde strands on his knee with one hand. When Ned had finished, Jack took the purse and put it in the band of the child's grubby pants. "That's yours. You can split it with Jamey and keep it in the cellar with you or let Miss Molly watch after it for you."

"And Miss Molly would just happen to be your wife?" Townley said and then lowered his voice as a medley of female voices moved past the parlor door. "Give me those hairs, you bastard."

"Now, watch yourself, Mr. Townley. I'll agree there's a bastard in the room, but I'm not him. And I'm keeping what's rightly mine, sir. Or Ned's, I should say, since he found 'em."

"Then get out. You're all thieves, aren't you? Those hairs could have come from anywhere."

"But they didn't, did they, Mr. Townley, sir? They come from up your flue where you stuffed that poor thing after you wrung her neck. Killed the fire first, of course, so you wouldn't harm yourself, and then crammed her right up and left as if you had business elsewhere."

"I want you to leave at once."

"And then came back after dark and pretended you was carrying cocks around in a sack instead of a poor dead serving girl who was handing you trouble. She won't be dirtying your life, but she did dirty your flue, didn't she? And I'd hate to spoil Mrs. Townley's morning with talk about your dirty bedroom flue . . ."

Townley was on his feet and heading for the parlor door. "Get out and take that filthy brat with you."

"There is just one more thing, guv'ner."

"And what, pray tell, would that be?"

"It's your elephant collection, sir. My boy here was giving it the eye before you come in. It fascinates him, you see. If he were to have just one, it would give him something to call his own. Give him a tiny piece of a world he'll likely never know. See what I mean, sir?"

Townley walked to the marble-topped table and waved his arm over it. "Of course. Help yourself. He'll be stealing sooner or later anyway, so why not start now?"

"The guv'ner said it's all right, Ned, to pick yourself out a trinket. Here." He led the boy over to the table and, finally lifting the stocking cap off his head, squatted down on eye level with him. "Pick out any one that strikes your fancy as a special gift from Mr. Townley for cleaning out his chimney so well. You done a very good job, Ned. Very good." The boy's eyes roamed the table and Jack stood and faced Townley.



"Now, you see, sir, that's twice you've said the boy would be stealing, and he's heard that, hasn't he? And maybe he will. Then again, maybe he won't. Maybe with your generous gift to help him along, just maybe he'll take up a fancy trade like baker or fireman or maybe he'll just keep sweeping chimneys for people like you. You think we're so different from you, but you're wrong. It's just that you live with money and we live without it. But we all die the same way, don't we? Is that it, Ned?"

The boy had picked out a dark green apple-sized elephant. He held it up on the palm of his hand for Jack's scrutiny. "How 'bout this one, sir?"

"That's fine, Ned. You keep that in your sack till this evening, then after supper you can show it to Miss Molly and maybe she'll sew you a pocket on your pants to carry it in. You can wrap it in this." He handed Ned the handkerchief.

Suddenly the parlor door opened, and Mrs. Townley strode in, carrying a bag over her shoulder. "Oh," she said and stopped short on seeing Jack and Ned in her parlor. "I'm going to the shops now, dear. What's that?" she asked, seeing the figurine in the boy's hand. "I thought you people had finished a half hour ago."

"We are finished now, ma'am, and leaving. Your husband was kind enough to reward my boy for the excellent job he done on the bedroom chimney."

"My lord, Reginald," Mrs. Townley said, starting to take the trinket from Ned's hand and then thinking better of it. "That's jade, isn't it? Isn't that the one you picked up last winter in Peking?"

"It is," Townley said and smiled at his own imaginary benevolence. "But he's just a poor boy, and we'll never miss it. It was nothing."

"Ain't that the truth, sire?" Jack said and smiled big at Townley before turning his attention to Mrs. Townley. "Your mister's a prince, Mrs. Townley. Advanced the boy a nice sum to give him a few pleasures as well. And all because Ned done such a fine job on his bedroom flue."

"Well," Mrs. Townley said, and smiled. Jack could tell she was itching to touch the boy, but not a square inch of him was clean and she was going to the shops. "I suppose it never hurts to extend a little charity to those in need. And after all," she laughed, "he might have saved your life, Reginald. He might have saved you from burning up."

"In this life anyway," Jack said, and smiled. "Good morning, Mrs. Townley. Good morning, sir."

FICTION

THE STOWAWAY

Bill Eidson

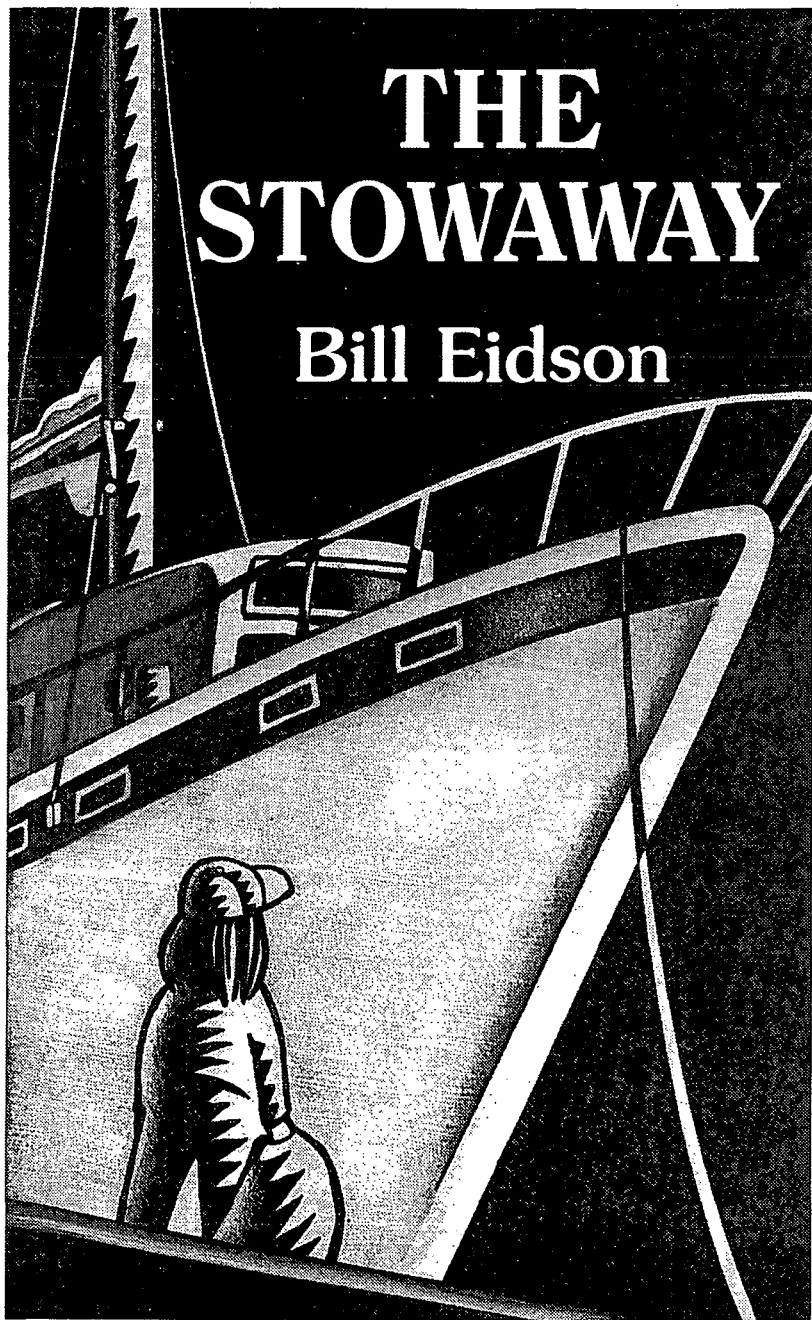


Illustration by Paul Gilligan

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“Has Peter seen her?” Nana Louise said. “She’s covered.”

“Ssssh,” Mom said. “She’ll hear you.”

But Allie didn’t turn her head. Didn’t let Nana Louise know, didn’t want to see her grandmother make a face and talk to her like she was a drippy nose little baby when she was almost eight.

Allie continued to look through the stuff in the boxes while Mom and Nana Louise packed the duffel bag with the fresh laundry they had laid out on the counter.

“Don’t touch anything, honey,” Mom said.

Allie didn’t look at her either. She knew Mom would fade off if she didn’t talk back.

The last three boxes. Fresh fruit. The radio that had just been repaired. Another box with two life jackets and some rope. Allie’s life jacket was in the closet.

Mom said to Nana Louise, “Keep after her on the scratching. The last thing she needs is scars.”

“You heard your mom,” Nana Louise said.

Allie looked away. What she felt on her skin was nothing compared to the way she felt inside.

Chicken pox. Dripping little balls, like dewdrops, the doctor had said. She was covered with sores. Around her mouth, all across her cheeks, behind her ears. Her body was a horror, an Itching Twitching Horror, she called it. ITH. Her mom had clipped her nails, rubbed her with a smelly brown lotion.

Sometimes Allie went into her mother’s bedroom and took off her shirt to stare in the mirror at the mess. Fascinated with just how ugly she could get. She was bad enough already, with her scraggly black hair, big nose, dark skin. Daddy’s girl, Nana Louise always called her.

Allie looked over at her mom. So beautiful she could be in a movie. Dark blonde hair, tanned skin, green eyes. Wearing shorts and one of Peter’s shirts. Sunglasses on a loop around her neck. She looked tired but happy.

Happy to be leaving.

“So has he seen her?” Nana Louise said again.

“No,” Mom said. “Soon as I realized Allie had been exposed, I let him know, and he moved onto the boat. Had to move all this damn stuff myself, but at least having him aboard *The Petrel* for the past few weeks means he’s gotten things pretty well organized. So we’re shooting for midnight.”

“Oh, Lisa. I wish you’d wait until morning.”

“You know Peter—he makes a deadline, he sticks to it. He says that since we’ll be sailing day and night for the duration I might as well get used to it. Besides, he’s promised me dinner at The Charthouse tonight.”

“The things you do for love,” Nana Louise said. “Hope it pays off.”

“Cut it out.” Mom sounded angry.

“What’s so wrong with a mother being happy her daughter’s

fallen for someone with money this time around?"

Mom shook her head, and Nana was quiet for a bit.

After a while Mom said, "I'm just going to take a cab with these last boxes. You'll stay here tonight? Peter's arranged to sublet the apartment, but they won't be in until next week."

"Fine. We'll go back to my place in the morning."

Allie turned her back on them and blinked away the tears. Nana Louise's place was a gray condo complex in Warwick called Brentwood Estates. Everyone was old, there were no other kids. There was no place to play or walk around. You couldn't even open the windows.

Mom came and knelt beside her. "This is it, Pumpkin."

Allie's lower lip start to tremble, and she clamped her jaw tight.

"Don't," she said softly. Tears slipped down her cheeks, streaking the brown goop.

"Honey, we've been through this," Mom said. "Peter's never had the chicken pox, so he's got to keep his distance. Otherwise we would take you."

Nana Louise stood over them. "It's no treat for adults, Allie. Pneumonia, hepatitis, shingles. Some people even die."

Allie looked around wildly.

"Ssssh," Mom rolled her eyes. "That's just for adults. Not kids. You'll be fine in a week or two."

"So why can't you wait?" Allie said.

"I've told you. We've got to beat

the weather. It'll be safer if we go now."

Nana Louise made a sound. "Hurricanes, for God's sake. Peter better do the right thing and propose."

Mom ignored her.

Allie looked her mother in the eye. "So I'll go on a plane to England? You promise you'll take me the whole year after that?"

There.

She saw it. Her mother looked away a little bit and then said in this quick voice, "That's the plan."

Allie stared at her mom.

"That's the plan" wasn't as bad as "we'll see," but it was close. "That's the plan" once meant that she would be sailing away with them today.

She had done fine on a bunch of short sailing trips. Six trips in all that Peter told them were their "shakeout" cruises. Allie sat where they told her, at least most of the time. Sometimes she worked herself between them so she had her mother to herself. And she usually pulled any lines that they told her, unless she was feeling too tired.

Then they had gone out for a weeklong trip to Maine. Her mother had told her it was *very important* that she behave herself, and Allie did, the whole time. Six days in a row Allie wasn't too loud, did what they told her when they told her, at least most of the time. Peter got really bossy sometimes. He'd yell at her mom to "trim the jenny" or "ease the boom vang." But Peter most-

ly seemed happy with them. He started calling Allie his "deck monkey," which she didn't really like but it made her mother smile when he called her that.

It was the last day that things went wrong. They were coming back through the Cape Cod Canal, and the waves seemed to just bounce the boat straight up and down. Peter started teasing Allie when she said she was feeling sick.

"Deck monkey want green bananas," he'd say. "Deck monkey want fried eggs?"

Her own dad never would have done that. But then he never would have been on a boat, never did anything much besides stay in his studio in Boston and paint. Curly black hair, brown skin, and a big nose like her. But he was funny and smart, and everyone liked him if he wanted them to. His paintings didn't always make sense to Allie, but she couldn't stop looking at them.

That's how he met Mom. She posed for him.

So did Belinda, and then he wanted to marry her.

Her own dad's face and Peter's had suddenly seemed the same, and she was so mad that she stopped looking at the horizon the way her mom told her; she stopped keeping what she'd been thinking the whole trip to herself.

"I hate sailing!" she'd cried. "I hate you!"

And then she threw up. Some of it went in the wooden criss-cross thing Peter was standing

on in the cockpit. He yelled, "Oh, for Christ's sake," while Mom tried to help her.

Mom took Allie over to the rail and held her shoulders. To Peter she said, "Maybe we can anchor in Red Hook or someplace else close?"

Peter said he had too much to do the next day, that they were going on to Newport.

"She'll be all right," he said. "We're out of the channel, let's get the sails up."

Then the stupid boat that had been so pretty on the earlier trips was a wind-screaming, hateful *thing* the way it was turned on its side like it was trying to slide her into the water. Allie yelled, "I hate you!"

"That's just great," Peter said. "You hear this, Lisa?"

"Please, Peter." Her mom's voice was low. "And please, Allie. Stop saying that."

But Allie said it again.

"Honey, I don't see how this is going to work out," Peter said. "This is nothing compared to what we might run into."

Mom put her mouth right up against Allie's ear, spoke through her hair. "Please."

Allie did.

She had still been mad at her mom, but it felt better having her hold her shoulders while she puked into the rushing green water. I hate sailing, she thought between gasps. And to the man at the wheel: I hate you.

"You promised," Allie said stonily.

"Honey, we don't have time to talk about this now." Her mom's face got impatient, the way it could. "Give me a BGH."

Their code for a "Big Girl Hug."

Mom said, "I'll see you in a month."

Allie hugged her, burying her face in her mother's shirt, taking in her scent. All too soon her mother peeled Allie's arms away. "That's it now."

Allie looked at Nana Louise and back to her mom. "Why can't I stay with Daddy?"

"He's busy with the new baby," Mom said. She slipped on her sunglasses and picked up the duffel bag. "Wish me bon voyage."

Nana Louise watched television until the sun went down. The shows were things that Allie didn't want to watch: people sitting up on chairs telling things, with other people screaming at them from the audience. Just the sound of it and the smell of Nana Louise's cigarettes made Allie feel sick at her stomach.

Allie tried to do some coloring and then to read her books, but it all seemed like too much work.

The day was so long it made Allie want to cry.

A month!

"Can I call my dad?" Allie asked. She stood over the phone.

It was the first thing she'd said to Nana Louise all day, and her grandmother turned on the couch, looking at her as if surprised. "What?"

"Can I call my dad? I know the phone number."

"What's he going to do?" Nana Louise moved her hand lazily, as if she were painting the air. "The *artiste*. He's made his decision, and I've seen it. Black tights and purple lipstick, nowhere near as pretty as my girl. Hope it doesn't take *her* ten wasted years before she smells the coffee."

"Please?"

"Fine. But he won't answer the phone if he's working. Says it distracts him."

"I know." Just hearing his voice on the answering machine would make Allie feel better. And he usually called back.

But Allie didn't even get to hear his voice. There was a new message from his wife, Belinda. Their baby was cooing, and Belinda talked as if she were the baby. "Leave a message, and Dada or Mama will call you back."

Allie slammed the phone down.

Nana Louise said, "Sit here, I want to have a little talk before I cook us some dinner." She patted the couch beside her, and Allie reluctantly climbed up. Nana Louise smelled of perfume that was too sweet. "Your mom is taking care of you by going alone on this trip. She and Peter are trying to figure out if they're going to get married. If they do, it'll be easier for you. I know he's not perfect, but who is?"

Nana Louise shook her head. "Sailing around the world, for God's sake. Why men need to do things like that is beyond me, but some of them do. And your mother can make the best of that

for six months or a year before she gets him to settle down. What she doesn't need is you underfoot."

Allie's lower lip began to tremble again. "But they *said* I was going."

"And *you* said you were going to behave. She told me what you yelled at him on that last trip. What if you acted like that when they were halfway across the ocean? Who's going to marry your mother if he has to deal with that? You don't want to grow up on a secretary's salary, believe me. This trip is too important for you to mess up."

"That's not why I'm not going," Allie said. Her breathing began to rush. "Mom said it's because I'm *sick*."

"Uh-huh," Nana Louise said. She smiled to herself, and suddenly Allie remembered her mom smiling the same sad sort of way. Allie remembered it, but she couldn't quite look at it directly. Believe what it really meant.

When Mom had dropped her off at Bonnie Tuttle's house two weeks ago, Bonnie had those spots on her face. Bonnie's mom had said, "You're sure, Lisa?"

And Mom had been smiling that sad smile when she said, "It'll be for the best."

After Nana Louise fell asleep in Mom's room, Allie pulled her duffel bag from underneath her bed. It was light green and had "*The Petrel*" stitched under the handles. A gift from Peter when he and Mom had first talked

about sailing across the ocean, a million years ago.

Allie stuffed inside it her life preserver, a pair of jeans, underwear, shorts, T-shirts, her raincoat, and her boat shoes. She put on her favorite sweatsuit and a baseball cap and tiptoed through the living room. She quietly let herself out.

The boat looked different. It was lower in the water, like it was squatting down. The vane thing was on the stern; there was a big box for the life raft on the deck.

Allie walked quietly along the finger pier beside the boat and listened.

She didn't hear them.

Maybe they were still at dinner.

She climbed on board. "Mom?" she called softly.

The padlock on the cabin door wasn't locked.

Allie made her way down the short set of stairs and felt her way in the dark to the little cabin off to the side. This was the one that would have been hers. She'd slept there all the other times. Now the berth was stacked full of things, bags of sails, boxes, tools. She climbed on top of the pile and stuck her legs down near what would have been the foot of the bed and found there was a little clear space. Not much, and it was very tight, because this part of the boat was right under the seat outside. Only her legs were expected to go here.

But she scrunched herself

down and pulled the sailbag in front of her so it blocked her from the view of the main cabin. She hugged her duffel bag and hoped they came down soon and opened a hatch so she could breathe easier.

She told herself once again not to scratch. She couldn't scratch if she hoped to ever be as pretty as her mother.

And then she fell asleep.

She awoke to roaring.

She screamed, but no one heard her.

The engine was only a foot or two away, separated by thick fiberglass but close anyhow. Quickly the space grew hot, but the boat was moving, she could feel it rising and falling on the water.

She felt good, at least for a few minutes.

They're taking me.

Then the heat and the motion got to her, and it was all she could do not to throw up.

But she didn't.

Look what that got her last time.

After what seemed hours, the engine went suddenly quiet.

Allie's ears were ringing.

She could hear them walking around above her, Peter saying, "That's it, that's it," and there was the snap of sails above them, and the boat began to tip over and then surged forward, the motion lighter and better than when the engine was on.

Allie sat up, licking her lips. Wishing she had brought something to drink. But she told her-

self she had to wait. That they would need to go to sleep soon.

But they didn't for a long time. She could hear them outside, but not well. She made a decision and very carefully crawled up on top of the sailbag and unscrewed the knobs that held the porthole closed. She'd done this plenty of times before; opening portholes was one of the jobs they'd given her back when she was supposed to have gone with them.

"The sails are pulling well," she heard Peter say. "And damn, that steering vane is dead on. What a night." He laughed.

"You happy?" Mom said.

"Oh, baby, I'm not happy, I'm ecstatic. You, me, and these stars shining out here like this?"

"It is beautiful." Her voice was quiet.

"But?"

"I'm just missing my little Pumpkin."

"You'll be all right," Peter said. "We'll be there before you know it. And the time together is just what we need."

"I guess."

"You *guess*?" His voice sounded a little mean to Allie.

"I just hope we're doing the right thing with her."

"We are," Peter said. "We're getting some time on our own. And she's learning about consequences."

"Oh, come on, Peter. She thinks it's because she's sick. That's all I ever want her to know."

"It'll be different later," Peter said. "When we have kids of our own."

"Ah, we're already at kids."

Allie could tell her mother was smiling.

That made Allie want to cry.

"Sure am," Peter said. "I want at least a couple. And I don't expect any of them to tell me they hate me. Or whine and get in our way."

"Can tell you've never had one before," Mom said.

"No, but I've had enough employees to learn a few things about people. Clear expectations and genuine consequences, Lisa. That's the key. Allie's going to learn she's welcome only if she behaves. If not, we can look into schools for her. I certainly don't want her ruining this trip—I've been looking forward to this all my life."

"I understand," Mom said.

But Peter kept talking. "Being beached for this leg should've been her first lesson. I'm disappointed you didn't tell her point blank why she's not coming instead of getting her infected with chicken pox, for God's sake. What if I'd caught it?"

Allie listened carefully.

Her mother's voice was quiet. "I didn't think it through. I'm sorry."

Allie thought she would cry.

She put her hands to her face, and her shoulders shook for just a moment.

But then she sat straighter in the little cabin.

"It's settled then. I'll—we'll—make a decision once she arrives in England. If she behaves, we take her. If not, we'll look into a school for the year we're away. She might be happier, she really might. With friends her own age. Either way she'll get a fair shake."

"All right, Peter."

Allie felt cold in the hot cabin. But not scared. She scratched at the sores behind her ear, at her chest. She scratched at her face.

Then she kept quiet.

Quiet all through the hours as her mother slept and as Peter took the first watch.

Quiet as she waited until they had switched, and he went to the forward cabin to sleep.

Quiet as she crept forward an hour later to poise herself above him as he slept with his mouth open, his handsome face already stubbled with a growing beard. Her own face was flushed with the virus that had stowed away inside her.

And then Allie kissed him on the lips.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

POSTICHE

Mignon G. Eberhart



Postiche: A pretentious imitation, particularly used of an inartistic addition to an otherwise perfect work of art.

ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA

The Wiggenhorn house could never have been a pleasant place: its slate roof was too heavy and dark, its turrets too many, its windows too high and too narrow. It was still less so on the cold, windy March afternoon when Susan Dare dismissed the taxi that had brought her from the train, and put her hand upon the gate.

Susan pressed the bell and thought of Jim's words to her over the telephone. "Go ahead, if you must, Susie," he'd said. "But if it looks like trouble, you get out. You take too many chances, my girl." He'd paused there, and then said in an offhand way: "Where'd you say the place is? Just outside Warrington? And what's the name of the people?" She'd told him, and had an impression that he'd written it down.

The door opened. A plump little maid took Susan's bag and invited her to enter.

The interior of the house was exactly what one would expect. There was a great deal of heavy, darkly upholstered furniture, stiff curtains which looked dusty and a musty smell tinged with camphor.

She had only a glimpse of the hall, however, for she was ushered at once into a hideous drawing room, and from a jungle of armchairs a woman arose. She was a large woman, very fat, with a jolly smile, several chins, eyes that were almost hidden in folds of flesh, and lightish, untidy hair. There was an open box of chocolates on the table beside her. "Miss Dare, I suppose," she said in an asthmatic voice. "I was expecting you. I am Miss Wiggenhorn. Miriam Wiggenhorn. Do sit down. Will you have tea?"

There was no tea in sight, so Susan said no, and thought Miss Wiggenhorn looked disappointed. "Now then, Miss Dare, I daresay you want to know exactly why I asked you to come here. I heard of you, you see, from John Van Dusen, our family lawyer. I believe he is acquainted with a woman for whom you did, er, something of the kind. A Mrs. Lasher." She picked up some embroidery hoops and then paused to glance quickly at Susan over them. Or at least so Susan thought.

"Yes."

"Yes. Well, at any rate, when things—owing to the confusion—to my own wish rather—" she floundered, threading a needle with care, and said, "So John said call in Miss Dare. Let her look around."

"Perhaps you'd better tell me just what it is about. I have only your note asking me to come. I ought to tell you that I'm not a detective, but a writer of mystery stories. And that I'm not at all sure of being able to help you."

"I think that's quite sufficient. I mean—Mrs. Lasher—Mr. Van Dusen—you see, Miss Dare, this is the trouble." She made a careful and intricate stitch, took a breath and said, "My uncle, Keller Wiggenhorn, died a few days ago. He was buried yesterday. And I want to make sure he—died a natural death."

"You mean you think he was murdered?"

"Oh dear, no."

"Then what do you mean?"

Miriam Wiggenhorn ate a chocolate cream thoughtfully. Then she said, "I think I'd better tell you the whole story. I'll tell it briefly."

And denuded of Miss Wiggenhorn's panting breaths and hesitation it was certainly a brief enough story. Keller Wiggenhorn had been ailing for some time, owing to a serious heart weakness. Had been so ill in fact that for some three months he'd been obliged to have the care of a trained nurse. He had died suddenly, when alone. The doctor was not surprised; it was to be expected, he said. The nurse was not surprised although she regretted that she had not been with her patient when he was taken with the last and fatal attack. No one had known it even, although it had happened during the daytime. But the nurse had been out in the garden, taking her rightful air and exercise. Durrie had been in town ("Durrie?" said Susan. "My brother," said Miss Wiggenhorn. "Younger than I. We have lived with my uncle for many years.")—Durrie had been in town; the cook busy in the kitchen, and Miss Wiggenhorn herself had been in the kitchen. "Putting up pickled peaches," said Miss Wiggenhorn. "Uncle was very fond of them."

Only the maid might have known of his fatal attack, and she had not. For he had apparently merely felt faint at first and had called to the girl as she passed his door to hand him his bottle of smelling salts. The girl had done so, had asked if he wanted anything else, had been assured that he didn't. He was lying, she'd said, on a sort of couch, drawn up to the windows so he could read. He had made no complaint, seemed no worse than usual. The girl had gone on about her work downstairs.

There were no sounds. He hadn't rung the bell on the table beside him. It was perhaps an hour after that that the maid returned and found he was dead.

Miss Wiggenhorn paused again and Susan waited. There was nothing, certainly, in the recital so far to suggest the thing that Miss Wiggenhorn had implied and then denied.

"But you see," said Miriam Wiggenhorn, "he died in great pain and struggle."

"Struggle!" said Susan sharply.

"The pillows were tossed about, his clothing disheveled, there were—marks on his throat."

It was very still. In the stillness someone walked heavily across the floor above and stopped.

"The doctor said it was all right. That with that particular trouble he was likely to gasp for breath at the last. He signed a certificate at once. Mind you, Miss Dare, I'm not saying there was murder done."

"Whom do you suspect?" said Susan bluntly.

Miriam Wiggenhorn did not reply directly. Instead she put down her embroidery with an air of decision and turned to face Susan.

"I only want you to stay here for a few days. To consider the thing. I want him to have died naturally, of course. But I cannot forget the—look of things. The marks on his throat. The doctor says he made them himself—clutching—you see?—for air. I don't suspect anyone. There is no one to suspect. Durrie and I. A cook who has been with us for years. A maid who is—too stupid in the first place; and has no motive."

"The nurse?"

"The nurse was devoted to her patient. And he to her. She is a sweet, charming young woman. As you will see."

"Did anyone profit directly by your uncle's death?"

"You mean money and property? Yes, of course. He left his property and money—all his possessions—equally divided between Durrie and me. We were like children to him. He was only a moderately wealthy man. His will permits us to live on in exactly the same manner. There's no motive at all."

"But still you feel he was murdered?"

"I feel that I want to be sure he was not. That is all."

There were footsteps overhead again and then someone was running down the stairway in the hall beyond. Miss Wiggenhorn said, "There's Durrie now."

"Do they—your family—know why I am here?" asked Susan.

"Oh yes," said Miriam Wiggenhorn readily, and Durrie entered the room.

He was certainly much younger than his sister; young and slender with light brown hair that had a crisp wave which any woman might have envied, light gray-blue eyes, and a handsome profile which just escaped being pretty. He looked Susan over from under thick blond eyelashes and said, "How do you do," shortly.

"Rosina's out for a walk," said Miriam. "Were you looking for her?"

"No," he said quickly. "Not at all. That is—have you seen the book I was reading?"

"What book?" asked Miriam. In the midst of the little distraction of explaining and searching Durrie looked up. "You write, don't you, Miss Dare?"

"Yes," said Susan prepared to be modest. It wasn't necessary. He

said, "Humph," with definite disfavor, took up a book from another table and went away.

"Dinner's at seven," said Miss Wiggenhorn. "I'll take you to your room."

Left to herself in an unaired guest room, Susan sat down and surveyed the worn red roses of a Brussels carpet blankly.

Marks on a dead man's throat. A doctor's certificate. No motives. No murder. Yet she was there.

She rose and went to the window. Nottingham lace curtains did not obscure the depressing view of a bare, cold March garden. As she looked, however, a woman came into view, walking with her head bent against the wind. She wore a dark cape which, when the wind blew, showed glimpses of a scarlet lining, and paused at a fountain as if waiting for something—paused and looked up suddenly at the house. Despite the gathering gloom Susan could see the outline of her face, a darkly beautiful face with a rich, full mouth. Rosina, that would be. The nurse. A sweet and charming young woman Miriam had said.

Quite suddenly another figure was beside the nurse, coming swiftly from some shrub-masked path. It was Durrie, with no hat on and the collar of his coat turned up around his ears. He spoke to the woman briefly, they both turned to look directly upward at Susan's window and almost immediately moved away. They couldn't have seen her, of course; there was no light in her room. She pulled down the shade and rang briskly for the maid.

Miss Wiggenhorn had said, leaving her, to question and explore as she liked. And the little maid, Susan thought, had been prepared, for she answered her questions directly and fully and eyed her with a timorous look.

It was all exactly as Miss Wiggenhorn had already told her. The maid had heard Mr. Wiggenhorn call her, had entered the room and handed him his smelling salts.

"But didn't you think that perhaps he was having or about to have an attack?"

The maid hadn't. "He always liked to have things near him; his books, his spectacles; a glass of water; his smelling salts. I never thought anything about it."

"What did you do then?"

"I asked if there was anything else. The water glass was empty, and he said to fill it and I did."

"Who found him? I mean after he was dead."

The girl's face paled a little, but her eyes did not blink.

"I did. Dreadful, he looked. Everything was tossed about. Glass on

the floor. Books—bottle with all the smelling salts spilled out of it. It looked as if he'd grabbed hold of the table cover and just jerked the whole thing off at once. He must have struggled—for a moment or two. I didn't hear anything at all. But then we'd shut the doors everywhere."

"Why? Was that customary?"

"I mean the doors to the back part of the house. Miss Miriam was making pickled peaches in the kitchen, and the smell was all over the house. You know—vinegar and spices. So strong it was sort of sickening. The nurse said to shut the door of his bedroom."

"The nurse? What is her name?"

"Miss Hunt. Miss Rosina Hunt."

There was certainly something the girl wanted to tell—her plump face was bursting with it.

"I suppose Miss Hunt will be leaving soon?"

"She can't leave too soon," said the girl. "Not that she's not treated me well enough. But she's too bossy."

"Bossy?"

"Snappy—as if she owned the place. And stubborn! Even with Miss Miriam. After all, it's Miss Miriam's house. Hers and Mr. Durrie's."

"Mr. Durrie is not married?"

"No, ma'am. Not him. Though he was engaged to be married once. But it didn't last long."

Susan said abruptly, "Will you show me the room in which Mr. Wiggenghorn died, please."

But at the end of a good half hour spent in that chilly, huge bedroom Susan was little wiser than when she had entered it.

In the hall she met Miriam Wiggenghorn. "Oh, you've been in his room?"

"Yes."

"That was right—John Van Dusen will be here to dinner. If there's anything—"

"There's nothing," said Susan, "yet."

Dinner. So she was to see the lawyer who had suggested sending for her. And the nurse would be there, too. Rosina.

Miriam, now in cherry silk, was in the drawing room when, half an hour later, Susan went down. With her was the lawyer, John Van Dusen, a spare, gray little man of fifty or so, who lifted his eyebrows, bowed to Susan, and looked as if he were stuffed with sawdust.

And almost immediately Durrie came into the room and then the nurse. And if the lawyer looked as if he were stuffed with sawdust, the nurse looked as if she were charged with some high explosive. But she kept her beautiful dark eyes lowered and her red, rich mouth silent.

The dining room was dimly lighted. The food was very rich and

very heavy, and there was no conversation. The lawyer talked a little of politics and lifted his eyebrows a great deal, Durrie said nothing and looked at the nurse, the nurse looked at the tablecloth, and Miriam looked at nobody and ate steadily.

After dinner Susan had vaguely expected a talk with the lawyer. Instead they played Parcheesi. Played it till ten o'clock.

There was somewhere in the house a clock which struck on a gasping, breathless note not unlike Miriam's panting voice. When it struck ten John Van Dusen rose, the Parcheesi board disappeared, the nurse murmured and vanished.

"Goodnight, Miriam. Goodnight, Durrie, A pleasant evening. Goodnight, Miss Dare." The little lawyer paused and looked at Susan as if he had just become conscious of her presence. "Oh yes," he said. "Miss Dare. So good of you to come. Not of course that there's any, er, reason for it. It really is absurd—the whole idea. Miriam is aware of my feeling, but she insisted—"

"Now, John," panted Miriam goodnaturedly, "don't blame me for this. And don't trip on the step—it's likely to be slippery. Go with him to his car, Durrie."

Durrie obeyed. Miriam looked at Susan.

"Well, my dear," she said expectantly. "How is it going? What did you think of John? He's a dear old fellow. But timid. Very timid. Wouldn't admit a murder if he saw it with his own eyes."

"Why is the nurse still here?" asked Susan.

"Rosina? Oh, I asked her to stay on for a little. During Uncle's long illness and her extreme devotion to him we became very fond of her."

The hall door opened and closed again, and they could hear Durrie locking it.

"Well—how about some cake or sandwiches before you go to sleep. No? Very well. Just ring the bell if you do want anything."

Susan was still shuddering when she reached her room; her hostess's interest in food was, to say the least, inordinate.

And it was ubiquitous. Susan tossed and turned and between times dreamed of enormous boxes of chocolate creams pursuing her. Once, quite late, a sound of some kind in the hall roused her so thoroughly that she rose and opened her door cautiously and peered into the shadows of the night-lighted hall. There was, however, nothing there.

But she was still wide awake and tense when she heard it again. Or at least she heard a faint sound which was very like the creaking of the steps of a stairway. This time she reached the door softly and managed to open it without, she thought, being detected. And her care had its reward, for she saw, coming very quietly from the landing of the stairs, the nurse. Rosina. She was wearing something long

and dark, and her face was hidden so that Susan saw only her thick, smooth black hair. But as she passed under the light, she turned suddenly and cast a sharp, strange look at Miriam Wiggenhorn's door. A look so strange and pale and fiery, so full of malevolence, that Susan felt queer and shaken long after the nurse had glided away.

But there was no reason to suspect murder. She told Miriam Wiggenhorn that the next morning. She did not add that there was something hidden, something secret and ugly, going on in the house. She said merely that she had thus far found no reason to suspect murder.

Miss Wiggenhorn took it with bland detachment and asked her, still blandly, to stay on a few days. She would welcome proof of Keller Wiggenhorn's death's being natural; she wanted Susan to have plenty of time. Susan said in that case she would like to see both the lawyer and the doctor and forestalled an offer on Miriam's part to have them summoned. She would go to their offices, said Susan firmly, and Miriam embroidered a flower and then said Durrie would take her in his car.

It was then that Susan risked a direct question about the nurse. "I saw her last night coming very quietly up the stairway. What would she be doing on the first floor so late? Do you know?"

"How late?"

"I don't know exactly. I suppose only around midnight."

Miriam Wiggenhorn pondered very briefly and offered a—to her—sound explanation. "I suppose she had gone down to the kitchen for a glass of milk," she said. "Or for something to eat. I hope you aren't going to involve little Rosina in this, Miss Dare."

"But there's only you and your brother and Rosina who had the opportunity," said Susan brutally. "That is, if you except the cook and housemaid."

"I suppose so," said Miriam Wiggenhorn. "Well—I'll ask Durrie to take you to see John. And the doctor."

She did so. Durrie looked sullen but consented, and said, during the six mile drive into Warrington, not one word.

And neither the doctor nor the lawyer yielded anything to Susan's inquiries. Except that the lawyer again rather nervously put the responsibility for calling Susan upon Miriam's plump shoulders.

In the end Susan, still with a silent and sullen Durrie, returned to the Wiggenhorn house no wiser than when she had left. They approached it this time along an old drive leading to a porte-cochere at a side door. Through the shrubs Susan caught glimpses of the garden, and, once, of a kind of summerhouse, except that it was much more substantial than most summerhouses are. Durrie caught her look and said, "My studio."

"Studio? Oh, you paint, then?"

"Well, yes and no. I sort of dabble around at this and that." He hesitated and then said suddenly, "Look here, Miss Dare, I don't know what on earth's got into Miriam. Uncle wasn't murdered. Why, there's no one who would want to murder Uncle. It's a perfectly senseless notion. I wish—I wish you'd tell her so and leave."

"And there were no outsiders in the house anyway," said Susan. "Except the nurse and—"

"Rosina didn't do it! That's impossible. Why, she—she—I tell you she couldn't have done it. She thought the world of Uncle. And he of her."

"Will Rosina be leaving soon?"

"I suppose so. Just for a time. Until we can be married."

"Oh—"

"Yes."

"Did your uncle approve of your engagement?" asked Susan after a moment.

The reply was not what she expected. "Yes," said Durrie. "He thought it was fine. Here you are, Miss Dare." He opened the door for her. She lingered to watch as he walked around the car which he left standing in the drive and disappeared in the direction of the summerhouse.

Susan went thoughtfully into the hideous drawing room. Rosina, immaculate in her white uniform, was there reading, and she lifted her fine eyes to give Susan one long, smoldering look. She was not disposed to be communicative.

Yes, she had liked Mr. Wiggenhorn very much. Yes, it was too bad he died alone; she felt very bad about that.

"But it takes them that way. It can't be helped. But it wasn't murder," she added with sudden, vehement scorn. "If he was murdered, it was an absolutely perfect crime. So perfect that it fooled me and the doctor, and I'm not easily fooled."

Susan was very thoughtful during a dreary, silent lunch. But it was not until late afternoon that, during a solitary, slow walk up and down the damp garden paths, one small phrase out of all the things that had been said to her began to emphasize itself. Was dispelled and returned. Began to assume rather curious proportions. Under its insistency she finally let her fancy go and built up, with that as a premise, a curious fabric of murder. Or rather it built itself up, queerly, almost instantly, with the most terrifying logic.

It couldn't be. There were reasons why it couldn't be.

Yet—well, who would know? No one. Who could tell her what she must know? Come now, Susie, she could hear Jim saying, let's get down to brass tacks. How *could* it have been done?

The house was still quiet when at length she returned to it. She summoned the little housemaid to her own room again. "I want you to tell me again, exactly how you found Mr. Wiggenhorn."

The girl shut her eyes and twisted her white apron.

"Well, he was there on the couch. That's the first thing I saw, because he was all twisted—looked so queer, you know. Somehow I knew right away he was dead. I screamed and everybody—that is, Miss Wiggenhorn and cook and then the nurse—came running."

"And he had pulled off the cover of the table—"

"Oh yes, and everything was spilled. Glass and water and—"

"Did you straighten the room?"

"Yes, ma'am. Right away. While Miss Wiggenhorn was telephoning for the doctor."

"What did you pick up?"

The girl's eyes opened widely. "Why, the empty water glass. The bottle of smelling salts—"

"Was it open? I mean, had Mr. Wiggenhorn used it?"

"Oh yes, the stopper was out and it had fallen on its side."

"Then you gathered up the crystals of salts that had fallen out?"

"No, ma'am," said the girl. "The bottle must have been empty. There wasn't anything in it at all. Except a sort of mist—"

"Mist!" said Susan violently.

"Well—steam. As if it had had hot water in it—you know. Only the bottle was empty."

"I see," said Susan after a moment. "What did you do with it?"

"Why, I—I put it on the table. And straightened up the table and wiped up the water that had spilled from the glass—"

"Wait. There was nothing in the glass?"

"No, ma'am. It had fallen on its side, too. I took it and washed it and put it back on the table."

She waited for further questions. Finally Susan said, "Was there any unusual odor in the room?"

The girl thought and then shook her head decisively. "No, ma'am. I didn't notice anything. Not even smelling salts—but then, the bottle was empty. But we were all excited—everybody running around—putting up windows."

"Opening windows? Who?"

But she didn't know exactly. "Besides," she said, "the smell of the vinegar and spices was all over the house. Suffocating, it was."

"It must have been. Did you replace the stopper in the smelling-salts bottle?"

She was dubious. Then remembered: "Yes. When I cleaned the room the next day. It had rolled under the couch."

"Do you clean Mr. Durrie's studio?" asked Susan abruptly.

"Oh no," said the girl. "He's got bottles and glass things in there. And he won't let me clean it. Miss Miriam does it. Only Miss Miriam and the nurse are allowed to go into the studio. And if you want

smells," she added with vehemence, "that's the place to get them. He says it's chemical experiments. Me and the cook think it's dreadful."

"Oh," said Susan. I've got to go, thought Susan blindly. I've got to leave. I've got to get out of here now. At once. Will they try to stop me? And I have no proof.

The girl was looking worried. "What's the matter, miss? Have I done anything wrong?"

"No, no," said Susan sharply. "It's all right. Do your parents live near here?"

"Two miles away."

"You'd better go to them at once. Walk. Make some excuse. Don't tell anyone you have talked to me. But go."

"G-go—" stammered the girl looking frightened. "Now?"

Somehow, tersely, Susan convinced her and watched her scuttle anxiously downstairs. (Besides, she would be a valuable witness.) And still there was no proof. And no time to be lost.

The house was silent all around her. The hall empty but shadowy and narrow. Which was Rosina's room?

She found it after opening doors to several cold, darkened bedrooms. The nurse's red-lined cape was across a chair. Her books on a table; powder and creams and bottles quite evidently belonging to the nurse and not to Miriam, on the dressing table. In an adjoining bathroom were other things: a bathing cap, bath salts, sponge, tooth-paste. She was exploring a large jar of bath powder with a cautious forefinger when there was a small rustle and Rosina herself stood in the doorway, eyes blazing.

"What are you doing in my things?"

"Searching," said Susan with false airiness.

"Searching! What for? I've nothing to conceal. I wish you'd get out of here."

"Nothing," said Susan, "would suit me better. Look here, when are you planning to be married?"

Rosina blinked. "I don't know. Next summer. Why?"

"Why not immediately?"

"Why, I—we haven't—"

"Is there anything to prevent an immediate marriage?"

"Why—no! Certainly not!"

"Could you be married next week?"

"Y-yes. Yes, of course."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Susan permitted herself to look incredulous. "Are you sure?" she said very softly.

For a long moment the nurse's fine black eyes blazed into Susan's.

Then she said furiously, "Certainly. It's no affair of yours, but you might like to know, since you are so officious, that that is exactly what I'm going to do. I shall be married, Miss Snoopy Dare, tomorrow."

They stepped out into the hall and Rosina banged her door and, furious, went downstairs. Susan waited and then returned once more to the same room. She looked around it again. There were remarkably few places of concealment. None indeed except the old fashioned mahogany wardrobe. She looked at it with disfavor but finally opened one of the heavy mirrored doors and stepped up into it. The few dresses offered little concealment. And there was only one way out. And Jim had said something about danger. But she didn't think of all that until she had settled herself to wait.

Not an easy wait. For the space was narrow and cramped, the air not too good in spite of the small opening she had left to enable her to see into the room, and a sense of danger, like a small red signal, became more and more marked. Danger in that muffled, orderly house. Danger—danger.

Minutes dragged on and Susan's muscles were numb and cramped. Suppose no one came. Suppose Rosina had decided on another course. But she wouldn't. And they knew, too, that Susan's own departure was imminent. Susan's eyes were blurred from staring too long and too fixedly at that crack of light. She closed them wearily.

And it was then that someone entered the room. Entered it so stealthily, so furtively, that Susan felt only the faint jar of footsteps on the old floor.

Her heart pounded in her throat, and her eyes were glued again to that crack.

And too late she realized that the wardrobe itself might be the objective.

Suppose the door should suddenly, silently open—suppose the very torrent of her thoughts betrayed, telepathically, her hiding place. Suppose—something passed across Susan's range of vision and obscured for an instant that crack of light.

Obscured it. And then was gone as silently, as swiftly, as it had come. But not too swiftly for recognition.

It was a long ten minutes before Susan dared move and open the door and, cautiously, emerge from her hiding place.

It was not difficult to find what she sought. The pungent odor of bath salts guided her. The jar was closed again, but it had been opened and disturbed.

She was cautious, too, in returning to her own room.

Now then, to get away. At once. Without fail.

Would they let her leave? She tossed her things in her bag and closed it; put on her coat. Knotted a yellow scarf with trembling

hands and pulled her small brown hat at a jaunty angle over her light brown hair. She looked pale and frightened. And was. But they had told her to go; at least Durrie had.

On the stairway she could hear their voices coming from the drawing room. Susan braced herself and entered.

And she need not have braced herself for it was all very simple and easy. They agreed that if Miss Dare felt that she could do no more and wished to go, she must go. They were very grateful to her. Her advice had relieved them greatly (this only from Miriam).

It was all very easy and very simple. Except that she didn't leave. For something was wrong with the car.

"*Wrong with the car?*" panted Miriam. "Why, you were driving it only this morning."

"I know," said Durrie sulkily. "The thing won't start. I don't know what's wrong. You'll have to wait till morning, I guess, Miss Dare. There's only one night train in to Chicago. It leaves at six."

"A taxi—" said Susan with stiff lips.

"Too late," said Durrie, looking at his watch. "It's five thirty now, and the roads are a fright. You can't possibly make it."

Miriam looked up from her embroidery hoops. "It looks as if you'll have to spend another night with us, Miss Dare. We are very happy indeed to have you."

Susan's bag dropped and her heart with it. She had a sudden, sharp pang of longing for Jim. "Very well," she said after a moment. "But—a theater engagement—I'll telephone—"

There was an instant of complete silence. Then Miriam said, panting, "Show her the telephone, Durrie. It's there in the hall, Miss Dare."

They were listening, all of them, while she called Chicago and then a familiar number. But Jim was not there. "Will you give him a message, please?" Susan said. "Tell him Miss Dare can't keep her engagement for the theater tonight. That she's—" she hesitated and then made curious use of a conventional phrase. "Tell him," she said, "that she's unavoidably detained."

But if they thought the use curious, they did not say so.

Jim would understand her message; they had had no theater engagement. But there was no way of knowing when he would return and find it.

Was there anything really wrong with the car? And what would they say when they discovered that the little housemaid had gone home?

They said nothing of it. Nothing at all. The cook, enormous in a white apron, served the meal. What did they know? Somehow Susan managed to get food past a stricture in her throat.

Later they played Parcheesi again.

"Tired, Miss Dare?" said Rosina once when Susan had glanced sur-

reptitiously at her watch. And Miriam, holding dice in her fat, ringed hand, said, "Are you perfectly sure you have nothing to tell us, Miss Dare? Your view of Uncle's death, I mean? Does it coincide in every way with what we know of it?"

Susan had to speak without hesitation. "I'm afraid I've discovered nothing that wasn't already known. But I'll think it over carefully; sometimes it takes a little while for things to become clear in one's mind."

Miriam tossed the dice, and Durrie took his turn. He said calmly, "Is that why you sent the girl away?"

The question fell into absolute silence. Long afterward Susan was to remember the way Rosina's strong, wide, white hand closed upon the dice and held them rigidly. And her own swift, queer recollection of the empty room upstairs. The room where a kind old man had been cruelly murdered.

She couldn't have spoken. And Durrie, all at once white and strange, cried, "You thought you'd fasten it on Rosina. But she didn't kill him. She—"

"Durrie," said Miriam, "*don't you know that only Rosina could have done it?*"

Durrie leaped to his feet. Rosina did not move and neither did Miriam.

And in the silence they all heard the sudden squealing of the brakes of an automobile at the side of the house. Jim, thought Susan. Oh, let it be Jim—

It was. Durrie went to the door and let him in. He gave one look at Susan and said very pleasantly that he'd come to take her home.

There was a bad moment when Miriam Wiggenhorn raised an objection.

"But you have only begun the investigation, Miss Dare. This is most distressing—most inconclusive—"

Jim said crisply, "Miss Dare will put any evidence she has into your hands in due form—"

It puzzled them a little. And in the instant of perplexity Jim thrust Susan out the door and closed it smartly behind them.

The engine of his car was running. Thirty seconds later they had turned into the public road and the Wiggenhorn house was a dark, brooding bulk behind them. "J-Jim," said Susan shakily.

"Scared?"

"Terrified—"

His profile looked forbidding. He said grimly, "I got your message. Drove like hell. What have you been stirring up?"

"Oh," said Susan. "A man was murdered, and I know who killed him. Can you remember chemistry?"

The car swerved, recovered, and Jim muttered. Susan went on:

"What was the name of that gas that's so dangerous? To breathe, I mean? It's heavier than air and if left open passes into the air. And when you transfer it from one container to another, you have to be so careful not to breathe it—it burns the lungs or something."

"Wait a minute. Let me pull myself together." He lighted a cigarette and thought for a moment. "I know—you can see the fumes above the test tube. Otherwise you can't detect its presence except by smell. And if the tube is on its side, all the gas escapes into the air. I'll remember it in a minute—hydrogen—"

"Hydrogen chloride," said Susan.

"Somebody die of it?"

"I think so," said Susan. "I'm sure—but somebody else can do the proving. I won't. They'll have to start with an autopsy."

Jim said, "Begin at the beginning."

Susan did. It took a long time, and Jim said nothing till she had finished. Then he said, "I begin to see the outline. Rich old man subject to heart attacks, likely to die of one but doesn't. Somebody wants him to die at once. Hydrogen chloride is introduced into a smelling-salts bottle; bottle is green and thus no one is likely to perceive its apparent emptiness or its actual contents. Maid hands man smelling salts when he is alone. He gets a good big sniff of it before he can stop himself—that's bad, Susan. Think of the horrible pain—the shock—he dies really of the shock; his heart can't stand it. Ordinarily I think a person might live for some hours or even days and be conscious. But the murderer counted on that bad heart and won. It looks like a natural death. Anyway, it is a successful murder. Durrie has a studio where he seems to do chemical experiments. The nurse would know something of chemistry. But the murder would have been perfect if Miriam hadn't suspected something. Which one did it?"

"It's funny," said Susan, "that you used the words 'perfect murder.' That very word is what started me thinking. Perfect. Too perfect!"

"Huh," said Jim with vehemence.

"Too perfect. No one suspected it was murder. And that was the motive, you see. Murder had to be suspected."

"Murder had to be—sorry, Susie, but I don't see."

"All right. Look at this. Durrie is in love with the nurse; wants to marry her. *His uncle didn't object*. And there was no motive at all, remember, for murder—no money motive. No question of thwarted love. No motive at all except—except that Rosina was a very willful young woman—and Miriam, no less willful, hated her."

"But Miriam approved the marriage."

"Oh, *did* she!" said Susan. "Then why were Rosina and Durrie obliged to steal meetings. In the garden at dusk. At midnight."

"How do you know Rosina had gone downstairs to see Durrie?"

"I didn't. But it's a good reason. Name a better one."

"Suppose she did," conceded Jim. "What then?"

"Miriam had ruled that house and Durrie in the smallest detail for years. She loved her rule—a previous engagement of Durrie's had been mysteriously broken off. The uncle was about to die anyway; here was a perfect plan to get rid of Rosina."

"Do you mean Miriam murdered the old man? But that doesn't make sense. She didn't gain by it."

"She did, Jim, if she could make Durrie think, in his heart, that it was murder. And that the newcomer, the nurse, was the only one who could have done it."

"You can't prove this, Susan, it's mere theory. How do you know it was Miriam?"

"You've said it yourself, Jim—there's a French term, *postiche*. It means a counterfeit, an inartistic addition to an otherwise perfect work of art. Well, the murder was perfect. *It was too perfect*. No one suspected it was murder. So Miriam had failed. Had failed unless she could get someone—someone without official standing—like me—to look into it; perhaps to discover some little thing, not too much (she was very sure of herself) but enough to make Durrie think it *might have been murder*. And that if it was murder, only Rosina could have done it. She didn't know exactly how much she could trust me to see or not to see. I think she meant to watch—to gauge—me. If necessary to introduce a little evidence against the nurse as she did. It's queer; her very words of praise for Rosina made me suspect the nurse. At first. She's very clever, Miriam Wiggernhorn."

"Then the housemaid was in danger from her—"

"The housemaid is a very valuable witness. And Miriam might have discovered that I had something of the true story from her. The real story. It wasn't just accident that Miriam was pickling peaches that afternoon, filling the house with a smell of vinegar that would mask any other smell. This isn't the season for putting up fruit. She had to pickle canned fruit. Besides there was the inartistic addition—"

"You mean her calling you and talking of murder *when nobody had suspected it was murder* shows that she thought of murder when, if she were innocent, she would have had no reason to suspect it. And that for some reason she was determined to suggest that it *was murder*."

"To suggest it anyway. The perfect murder, except for the inartistic addition. *Postiche*. And I," said Susan, "am it."

"But—" Jim paused and said in a helpless way, "all this is very nice. But, angel, it's only theory. It isn't a bad idea, you know, to have proof."

"Oh yes—proof. It's in my bag. Wrapped in a handkerchief and mixed with bath salts. But identifiable."

"What!"

"Smelling salts. When she emptied the bottle, she kept the salts in case her investigation should need a little steering. Rosina, you see, has a fine temper. When I hinted there was something preventing their marriage, as if I were suspicious about it, she flounced down to tell Durrie and Miriam that she wanted it to take place at once. Durrie agreed of course. Rosina had much the stronger will. Miriam agreed, too—and came straight upstairs to plant the clue. Nobody in the house ever used smelling salts but Keller Wiggenghorn."

"Framing her."

"Exactly. I suppose she would have tried something more open, given time."

"How did you know it was Miriam?"

"Saw her."

"From where?" demanded Jim.

"N-never mind," said Susan in a small voice.

Jim stopped the car and looked at her intently. But when he spoke, it was with an air of preoccupation. "There's guilt in your voice," he said absently. "But we'll skip it. Do you know, I have a queer sort of impulse. I'd like to—"

"To what?"

"To kiss you," said Jim unexpectedly, and did so.

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Betty Queen was shot by Bert Jules, who later confessed it was an affair gone sour.

NORTH TOWER

FLOOR	HUBAND AND WIFE	PROFESSION
4	Edgar and Flora Katz	salesman
3	Carl and Betty Queen	teacher
2	Adam and Dora Ord	artist
1	George and Helga Manus	manager

SOUTH TOWER

FLOOR	HUBAND AND WIFE	PROFESSION
4	Henry and Ellen Norman	banker
3	Bert and Alice Jules	contractor
2	Frank and Gina Lewis	doctor
1	Dan and Clara Parks	engineer

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



William Kent Krueger's debut novel, **Iron Lake** (Pocket, \$23), is a literate thriller that is strong on character (including former sheriff Cork O'Connor) and very evocative of place (a small Minnesota town in the cold weeks before Christmas). Against this backdrop Krueger sets an adventure laced with the Ojibwa legend of the Windigo, Native American casino dealings, a dash of state politics, a romance, the machinations of a well-disguised and murderous sociopath, and a climax in which a killer stalks his prey through snowy woods and across a frozen lake.

Walter Satterthwait's **Masquerade** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) takes readers to Paris in 1923. Handsome American Pinkerton agent Phil Beaumont and spunky British op Jane Turner have been assigned to the same case, the deaths of a wealthy playboy publisher and his mistress. Beaumont is spending lots of time sampling the cuisine with his French contact, a dapper gourmand; meanwhile Jane is trying to act the part of a nanny in her undercover disguise. Soon, however, the sparring duo are on the same trail to track down a murderer. Satterthwait gives readers a detailed view of the times, including visits with Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. A lively entertainment with a fresh period setting.

Edgar-winner Thomas Cook writes powerful, layered novels with compelling protagonists who choose to walk down paths that quietly lead them to ever darker places in the human heart, and ultimately to breathtaking and revelatory surprises at the journey's end. His latest, **Instruments of Night** (Bantam, \$23.95), is another winner. Writer Paul Graves is a loner, the creator of a Victorian detective series—not the usual guest invited down to stay at the celebrated artists' refuge of Riverwood. The owner, the grown daughter of the late, famous writer who built the mansion, challenges Graves to discover how her best friend really died one summer at Riverwood

decades ago. She has read Graves' books; she believes he can employ the methods used by his brilliant sleuth to get to the truth. But finding the truth will mean unearthing long-buried secrets at Riverwood—and what of Graves' own secrets? Here's a writer with the tongue of a bard, a sage's eye for characters, and the imagination of a visionary. It's a dynamite combination.

Fans of Mary Higgins Clark have discovered Iris Johansen's books, and they'll be pleased to hear that there's a new one. **The Face of Deception** (Bantam, \$23.95) has readers rooting for Eve Duncan, a very private woman with a lot of tragedy in her past. She has managed to rise to prominence as a forensic sculptor, a technician who "fleshes out" skulls found by the police to aid in the identification of victims. But as determined as Eve is, she has perhaps met her match in John Logan, self-made millionaire, who makes her an offer she can't refuse—and which puts her in deadly danger. A fast read with a dollop of romance and a lot of action, though all in a plot, I warn you, that may strain the credulity of some readers.

In **Wicked Games** (St. Martin's, \$24.95), Lambda Award winner Ellen Hart brings back restaurant owner Jane Lawless and her flamboyant sidekick Cordelia in another tense tale of family failures, tragedy, and finally murder. Jane's big old house seems especially huge and empty while her aunt and uncle are away on an extended visit to England. It also doesn't help Jane's isolation that she suspects her new lover, Julia, of lying to her. So Elliot Beauman, the very private writer of children's books, arrives to lease Jane's third floor at just the right moment. Or does he? Days later the media reveal Elliot to be a psychic who has just helped the police turn up a corpse—and now he's beginning to have new visions of death. Hart explores love and deceit, loss and anger, and the high price one may pay to keep a secret safe, in another first-rate domestic mystery.

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THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by David A. Rooney of Natick, Massachusetts. Honorable mentions go to Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; Stu Brynien of Brooklyn, New York; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; William



setts; and Pamela Holub of Bird City, Kansas. Glose of Poquoson, Virginia; David Gott of Beaverton, Oregon; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Tom Fitzgerald of Boston, Massachusetts; and Pamela Holub of Bird City, Kansas.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

THE DEAD LETTERCARRIER OFFICE by David A. Rooney

"Looks dead, Bert."

"Ayuh. Looks dead."

"Looks like murder."

"Looks like. Suppose we ought to call the police."

"Don't know what for. They can't do nothing about it."

"True. Might even think one of us done it."

"One of us, or both. Ain't neither of us got an alibi for last night."

"Then there's motive. A robot carrier would put us both out of work."

"Especially threatening, since we ain't fully vested in our pension."

"Ayuh, would be tragic for us all around."

"Gonna be an awful fuss anyhow, when they find him."

"Could be, if they do find him."

"Can't hardly miss him, being where he is, Bert."

"Might not be there when they come to see, if you follow."

"You mean, hiding the evidence?"

"Might save our pensions."

"Save us a lot of fuss, anyhow. Carry the pieces out in our bags, you think?"

"Not a lot of parcels this morning. Should fit between us."

"Should."

"Unless someone confesses to it. Don't suppose y'care to?"

"Don't suppose I would, Bert. You?"

"No, don't suppose I would either."

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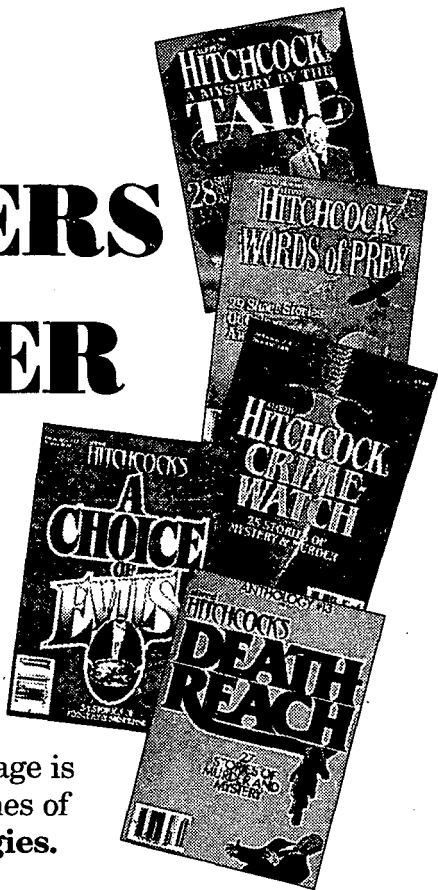
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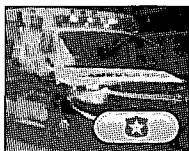
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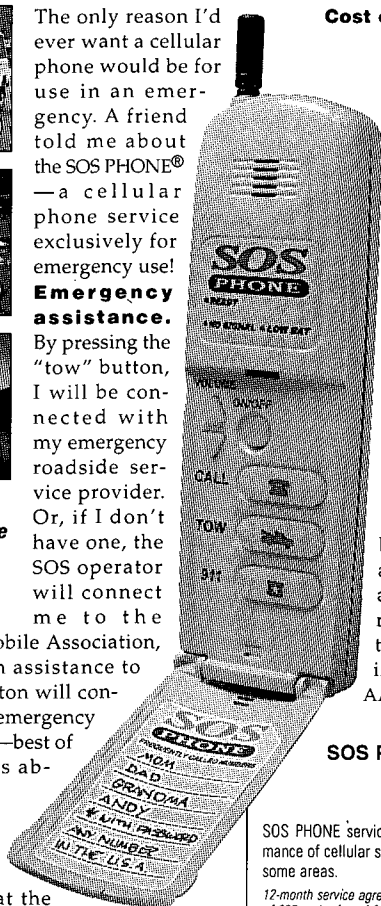
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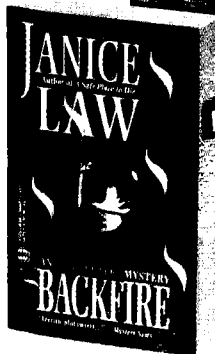
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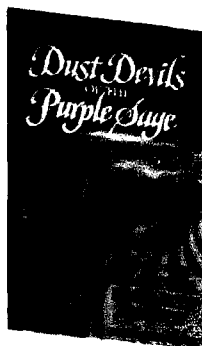


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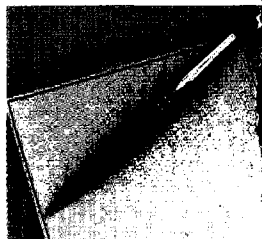
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